

Chapter 7: Applied Rhetoric as Disciplinary Umbrella: Community, Connections, and Identity

Jennifer R. Veltsos

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

Matthew R. Sharp

EMBRY RIDDLE AERONAUTICAL UNIVERSITY

Jacob D. Rawlins

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

Ashley Patriarca

WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY

Rebecca Pope-Ruark

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Abstract: This chapter argues that many of the existing names and boundaries in use around professional communication create artificial separations among research, pedagogy, theory, and action related to the practice of rhetoric in contemporary society. Scholars working in this area teach and conduct research across a variety of disciplines, but we share a rhetorical foundation and a concern for the practical application of that theory. This combination of classical rhetoric and public action provides a way to move our work beyond the confines of the academy and actively engage in rhetorical work within the communities where we work, live, and research. We argue that *applied rhetoric* is an overarching term that more accurately describes the interdisciplinary work used by scholars, teachers, and practitioners in diverse areas of communication who work to clarify ideas that help people accomplish goals, to explicitly connect research to teaching, and to be a force for good in the world.

Keywords: applied rhetoric, praxis, disciplinarity, identity

The modern study of rhetoric, in all its forms and functions, spans a wide range of disciplines. Rhetoric scholars identify as researchers and practitioners of professional and technical communication, rhetoric and composition, organizational rhetoric, the rhetoric of science, the rhetorics of health and medicine, public rhetoric, or civic rhetoric, among others. While the result of this ever-expanding specialization may be an increased influence of rhetoric across a range of disciplines,

professionally we have been fractured into niches that use seemingly arbitrary boundaries to distinguish our work from others. This fracturing arguably began in 1914, when public speaking teachers left the National Council of Teachers of English to form what would become the National Communication Association. This split between rhetorical scholars of written and spoken work was the first of many separations where rhetoricians working in specific contexts would set out to find specialized audiences and collaborators for their work. While this specialization is seen as useful by some for the purposes of deepening expertise, it does have a downside (Harlow, 2010).

This ever-increasing disciplinary specialization and its concomitant specialization of discourse (Russell, 2002) makes cross-disciplinary collaboration simultaneously (and paradoxically) more necessary and more difficult (Harlow, 2010). Furthermore, individual scholars may find themselves feeling somewhat lost—between rhetorical traditions, research methods, and pedagogies—not fully at home in their own discipline but not completely accepted by their peers in other disciplines. Historically, these disciplinary divides have caused theoretical scholarship to be separated from and privileged over scholarship on pedagogy (Leff & Lunsford, 2004; Zarefsky, 2004). Scholarship with a more traditional, humanist approach is often separated from and privileged over that which examines the social utility and practical application of rhetorical theory (George & Trimbur, 1999; Mountford, 2009). Furthermore, rhetoricians are experiencing “an erosion of their influence” (Mountford, 2009, p. 407) even within their long-standing disciplinary homes of English and speech communication.

With these problems in mind, in June 2018, an interdisciplinary group of scholars gathered at the inaugural meeting of the Applied Rhetoric Collaborative to discuss characteristics that link their work and how to cross the deepening disciplinary lines within our field. Together, 25 attendees who specialize in technical communication, design thinking, environmental communication, classical rhetoric, engineering communication, and communication studies discussed ways to cross those artificial boundaries. What emerged from the inaugural symposium (and two follow-up symposia) was a clear desire to connect our teaching and scholarship with our communities, to promote the application of rhetoric in a variety of situations and purposes outside of academia, and to develop conversations and collaborations across our current disciplinary lines.

This was not the first time that scholars have crossed disciplinary lines to attempt a reunification of rhetoric’s progeny. According to Diana George and John Trimbur (1999), the Conference on College Composition and Communication, founded in 1949, lists among its original goals the unification of teachers of composition and communication. By bringing the instructors of those disparate courses together, many assumed the so-called “communication approach” to the first-year course—combining instruction in speaking and writing—would take hold. But the inclusion of “the 4th C” in both the organization and in the course’s curriculum turned out to be “a brief affair, characterized by

mutual attractions and misgivings, that proved unable to imagine a future for itself” (George & Trimbur, 1999, p. 682). Next was the Wingspread Conference in January 1970, which had the laudable goal of “finding a suitable definition of rhetoric and a common goal for future study suitable for interdisciplinary alliances” (Mountford, 2009, p. 407). Although the conference’s proceedings, titled *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, were optimistic about this newfound interdisciplinary mission (Mountford, 2009), Thomas O. Sloane (2010) claims that “it is less visionary or prophetic about the future of rhetoric than it is diagnostic of its present condition. It offers a prospectus for lines of inquiry needed to take our discipline into the future” (pp. 3-4). And, while the direction provided by such a prospectus would have been a necessary step to accomplishing the mission of the conference, little more came of it. The Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (ARS), founded in 2003, however, showed more promise. An “organization of organizations” (Clark, 2004, p. 5), ARS was intended to unite the study of rhetoric across traditions in response to

the difficulty rhetoric scholars have experienced in learning about each other’s work, in sharing insights with those who are working on similar projects but in different traditions, in making their collective voice heard by granting agencies, and through an absence of coordination among their respective scholarly organizations (Clark, 2004, p. 5).

Resulting in a special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* in 2004, the calls to action from ARS prioritized the necessity of rhetorical education and an understanding of rhetoric as agentive and action-oriented (Clark, 2004; Geisler, 2004; Hauser, 2004; Leff & Lunsford, 2004; Zarefsky, 2004). Unfortunately, David Zarefsky’s (2004) warning against the “fatal flaw” of these recommendations proved true: with no clear implementing agent (individually or organizationally), they were largely “left on the shelf” (p. 37). And, finally, the “Rhetoric In/Between the Disciplines” seminar at the 2013 Rhetoric Society of America Institute led to “The Mt. Oread Manifesto on Rhetorical Education” (2014). The manifesto lamented the separation of writing and speaking instruction and encouraged rhetoricians to “cross departmental and disciplinary lines and collaborate to design and implement an integrated curriculum in rhetorical education (p. 3). Though encouraging that scholars of rhetoric still consider an integrated curriculum a worthy goal, to our knowledge, this manifesto, like the many before it, has not led to any great revolution in the curriculum or, for that matter, in the study of rhetoric.

Most of these past efforts for reunification of rhetorical traditions have focused on the idea of education and pedagogy as the rhetorician’s “birthright” (Hauser, 2004, p. 52). Accordingly, they framed the rhetorician’s responsibility and contribution to society in terms of educating our students and preparing them with the rhetorical skill required for civic life (Geisler, 2004; Hauser, 2004; Leff &

Lunsford, 2004; Mountford, 2009; The Mt. Oread Manifesto, 2014; Rood, 2016). This desire to use our rhetorical expertise to “make a difference in the world” through our pedagogical context is admirable, but as encouraging as these past efforts are, very little has come from their optimism for the reunification of rhetorical education and scholarship.

Enter the Applied Rhetoric Collaborative, which expands that desire to make a difference through rhetoric from being entirely rooted in our pedagogical endeavors to also include other aspects of our professional and nonprofessional lives. In other words, while we share “a commitment to rhetoric as action,” we see our ability to encourage “a society that grants [rhetorical] agency more broadly” as expanding beyond the classroom (Geisler, 2004, p. 15). Applied rhetoric, as we define it, includes using our rhetorical expertise in innumerable contexts to effect positive change in the world, including but not limited to our classrooms.

In our definition, applied rhetoric is a combination of classical rhetoric theory, professional practice, and public action. It uses rhetoric to solve complex problems at work, in our classrooms, in our communities, and in our public and private lives. In this chapter, we explore this definition of applied rhetoric as the thread that crosses existing disciplinary lines to connect business, technical, scientific, and professional communication. The combination of classical rhetoric and public action provides a way to move rhetorical work beyond the confines and disciplinary divisions of the academy and to actively engage in the work of rhetoric within the communities where we work, live, and research. Applied rhetoric (as an organization, a discipline, and a professional identity) is uniquely positioned to clarify ideas that help people accomplish things, to explicitly connect research to teaching, and to be a force for good in the world.

■ Our Shared Rhetorical Roots

Applied rhetoric is by no means a new term, although it has not been used consistently in scholarship or in pedagogy over the past five decades. One of the earliest scholarly references to applied rhetoric emerged in the field of linguistics. Robert Kaplan’s 1970 “Notes Toward an Applied Rhetoric” focuses on supporting advanced English learners as they learn how to analyze and create common discourse patterns. While promising, *applied rhetoric* quickly fell out of favor as a term in linguistics scholarship, replaced with *contrastive rhetoric* and other similar terms.

More recently, applied rhetoric has emerged as a key term in two scholarly tangents: rhetoric of science and rhetoric of economics. In 2013, Carl Herndl and Lauren Cutlip announced the foundation of an Institute for Applied Rhetoric of Science and Sustainability at the University of South Florida, which would focus on “science policy, citizen participation, modeling, and data visualization” (p. 5), four areas that sit at the intersection of theory and practice. Four years later, Herndl (2017) described an “applied RSTEM” (rhetoric of science,

technology, engineering, and medicine) and wrestled with moving the field into the post-critical age. Herndl suggested the common theme we seek, but he warned that the term could suggest a resistance to theory as well. Locke Carter (2005) defines applied rhetoric as covering the broader fields of technical communication, business communication, and rhetoric and composition, as well as mass and speech communication. In Carter's view, applied rhetoric relies on a market of ideas in which professional communicators (and their academic counterparts) argue for the value of their work. A key takeaway of Carter's work is the continued emphasis on the real-world practicality of rhetoric instead of solely focusing on the more instrumental and critical approaches that tend to take priority in academia. The shared values developed at the three Applied Rhetoric Collaborative symposia—connecting academics with communities and practitioners and developing deliverables to help them accomplish their goals—echoed Carter's work.

The term *applied rhetoric* has also been incorporated into program and course descriptions. Although publicly available program and course descriptions do not always convey what actually occurs in those programs or courses, they provide a window into what a particular program values. As Lisa Melonçon and Sally Henschel (2013) note, the presence of a course—or a program itself—within a course catalog lends it authority. Thus, the existence of these courses and programs suggests that applied rhetoric as a disciplinary umbrella is a concept many of us already acknowledge in our pedagogy and program administration.

The heart of applied rhetoric is the theory and practice of rhetoric itself. From the earliest records, rhetoric was a public practice, whether in arguing the merits of the law or influencing the decisions of a purely democratic Greek society. Over the millennia of rhetorical discussion, the definitions and practices of rhetoric have expanded and shifted until the modern concept of rhetorical scholarship includes public speaking, composition and writing, professional communication (in all its varieties), social construction and organization, and materialist studies (among many more fields and subfields). Ironically, while modern law and politics have evolved to become their own action-oriented fields, they remain dependent on the practice of rhetoric but have distanced themselves from its theoretical foundations to focus on the practical, professional applications of rhetoric. Rhetorical scholarship, on the other hand, has expanded to include a wide variety of approaches, methods, and topics but often downplays the public actions that defined classical rhetoric.

The expanding definition of rhetoric has been coupled with a dispersion of rhetorical scholars across the colleges and departments of modern universities. Geographically, rhetoricians are scattered throughout institutions. Many reside in English departments, where they are housed with literature, writing studies, linguistics, and creative writing while they teach courses like composition, technical communication, business communication, rhetorical studies, usability, visual communication, and proposals. Some are in communication studies depart-

ments, teaching public communication and often focusing more on oral rather than written genres. Some are in business schools, where they may teach written or oral business communication courses. Others are embedded within technical disciplines like engineering, and yet others work on their own as consultants in writing centers and other academic support services. Even outside of these organizational units, still other colleges and departments may hire individual rhetoricians to teach writing or speaking in service courses (see Harlow, 2010 and rhetmap.org).

This dispersion of scholars allows for academic specialization and focused instruction but can also lead to practical problems: territorial disputes; competition for limited funding; competition for students; and confusion in defining disciplines for colleagues, administration, and students. It can also discourage collaboration between scholars who, while relying on the same rhetorical traditions, are seeking to meet different disciplinary standards for presenting and publishing research, including separate conferences and publication venues.

Although the dispersion of rhetorical scholars across universities can be a source of tension and conflict, we also see it as an opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration and action. By focusing on our shared rhetorical roots and our desire for practical action, the term *applied rhetoric* provides a unifying umbrella to connect scholars with disparate interests and academic homes. The term explicitly returns our focus to our shared roots in classical rhetoric. Applied rhetoric is not associated with a particular subject matter but rather with supplying arguments. For example, to a casual observer, the programs of the symposia held by the Applied Rhetoric Collaborative may seem eclectic. Speakers have discussed modern sophistry, story maps, internet comments, Wikipedia, recipe books, the designation of national monuments, new materialism in the workplace, veteran's studies, engineering communication, the Chicago Statement, faculty development centers on campus, pet rescue adoption policies, expert witnesses in murder trials, and Martha Stewart's product lines. By design, the symposia programs have not been "identifiable with knowledge of any specific subject" (Aristotle, 1358a/1991), yet there has been a remarkable cohesion in the presentations because of their focus on rhetorical research and practice in public spheres. By applying our "distinct abilities of supplying words" (Aristotle 1358a/1991), the small group has proven that different theoretical foundations, research methods, topics, and applications can coexist and even speak to each other through applied rhetoric.

The connection of matter and language (Cicero, III.v/2001) and their effect on persuasion, effectiveness, and ethicality have been at the heart of rhetorical studies for centuries. By organizing ourselves around the concept of applied rhetoric, we expand Cicero's definition to include the matter, the language, and the application. This combination of matter, language, and application extends Lloyd F. Bitzer's (1968) foundational rhetorical triangle to more fully reflect the practice of rhetoric in its many forms and forums.

Technical and Professional Communication as Applied Rhetoric

Although applied rhetoric scholars have a variety of academic homes, a number of us have historically located ourselves within the disciplines of technical communication, business communication, or an uneasy combination of the two. The history of technical communication has been well documented (see Connors, 1982; Kynell, 1999; Kynell & Tebeaux, 2009; Moran & Tebeaux, 2011, 2012; Staples, 1999). Less well documented is the history of business communication, but it, too, traces its roots to rhetoric (Carbone, 1994; Reinsch, 1996). Yet even with 2,000 years of history and philosophy, both have something of an identity crisis. Who are we? What do we do? These questions are asked and answered again and again as changes in technology and communication practices expand our boundaries. More, the act of claiming to be a scholar of one or the other can be tricky; simply choosing the names within this section sparked an ongoing discussion about where and how to use which term. It can also be fraught: perceived disciplinary turf issues in some departments may mean that declaring ourselves a scholar in one of these “practical” forms might exclude us from also identifying as a scholar of rhetoric.

Complicating matters is the interdisciplinary nature of both technical and business communication. Each exists in relation to other disciplines and other workplace problems. Through these interactions, we have collectively become something of an intellectual magpie:

Technical communication shares and borrows methods, theories, and even content areas with design communication, speech communication, and rhetoric and composition as well as with psychology, education, and computer science. These fields share questions about usability, Web-site design, and information management. What makes technical communication distinct and recognizable? (Rude, 2009, p. 175)

Rachel Martin Harlow (2010) concurred, describing technical and professional communication as a “third culture discipline” that uses our relationships with other disciplines to synthesize ideas and methods that meet our needs. As if to confirm this notion, the journal *Business Communication Quarterly* became *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* in 2014. James Dubinsky (2014) explained the change as a move toward interdisciplinarity and to more accurately reflect the shared “intellectual and methodological roots” of its authors.

Being a mashup discipline means we spend precious time creating lines of demarcation, sometimes arbitrarily. For example, what is the difference between technical communication courses and business communication courses? Their locations within institutional structures suggest the difference would be significant. Technical communication programs (and, thus, the courses) are overwhelmingly

located within humanities-focused departments, such as English or stand-alone technical communication departments (Melonçon & Henschel, 2013). Business communication courses are usually located in a center within the business school, within a particular department in the school, or in the business school in general (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013).

Given these institutional separations, one could reasonably expect an equally significant difference in the content and structure of these courses. In practice, however, the distinctions are harder to identify. Several curriculum audits have identified the typical content of business communication courses from the perspectives of both employers and teachers (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014; Russ, 2009; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). More recently, Kristen Lucas and Jacob D. Rawlins (2015) proposed five core business communication competencies: professional, clear, concise, evidence-driven, and persuasive. Sally Henschel and Lisa Melonçon (2014) identified essential conceptual skills for technical communication as rhetorical proficiency, abstraction, experimentation, social proficiency, and critical systems thinking. Yet no curriculum audits are publicly available for technical communication service courses. When researchers do examine the technical writing service course, they address specific facets of the course, such as the inclusion of intercultural communication components (Barker & Matveeva, 2006; Matveeva, 2007, 2008) or effective conversion of the course into online formats (Battalio, 2006), rather than its curriculum. Coppola (2010) described the Society for Technical Communication's effort to build a body of knowledge that would help establish technical communication "as a fully mature profession" (p. 12). Yet several years after its founding, Ray Gallon (2016), a former member of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) Board of Directors, acknowledged that the project was still largely incomplete.

More than 25 years ago, Nancy R. Blyler (1993) suggested that the curricular separation may be based on differing intents: business communication is persuasive, whereas technical communication is instructive and informative. But, she argues, if technical communication is rhetorical, then thinking in terms of persuasion vs. instruction is a moot point. Blyler also suggested that the separation seemed to be based on the documents that students will write in the workplace. Business communication consists of annual reports, sales, advertisements, and proposals; technical communication consists of reports, instructions, descriptions, manuals, and specifications. While anecdotal evidence suggests that these perceived differences are still in place, a recent survey of business and STEM faculty at mid-sized public universities in the northeast and midwest United States indicated that the differences are now negligible (Patriarca & Veltsos, 2017).

If we were wrong about the curricular separations, could we be wrong about other separations that divide us into increasingly small niches of research (Russell, 2002)? Could we be more similar than we realize? Saul Carliner (2012) traced the confusion that is caused when we define ourselves too narrowly, citing an STC study in which participants offered hundreds of working titles, including

product information specialist, documentation specialist, business analyst, and information developer. Other titles in use include writer, editor, usability specialist, content strategist, and content developer. The term *technical communicator* was intended to be more inclusive, but it may still alienate those of us who do not work in technical fields, develop technical content, or teach students how to communicate in technical disciplines. The revised term *technical and professional communication* (TPC) is sometimes used to reflect the various forms that our work can take, yet it is wordy and somewhat redundant (which doesn't reflect well on our own abilities as communicators). Furthermore, as the work associated with technical communication expands (e.g., usability, project management), we must continually redefine what technical communication means and does.

It's not just the work of TPC that is changing. Natasha N. Jones, Kristen R. Moore, and Rebecca Walton's (2016) antenarrative identified several threads within technical and professional communication scholarship that stretch the "pragmatic identity" (p. 213) of our field beyond its usual focus on efficiency and problem-solving. They noted issues of feminism and gender; race and ethnicity; international and intercultural communication; community and public engagement; user advocacy; and diversity, social justice, and inclusion. In widening the scope of TPC, they recenter our attention on the human impact our work has on society.

We go one step further and connect our work not only through its human impact but also through its use of rhetorical theories and strategies. Like the Sophists, we resist classification based on location, subject of study, or methods (Harlow, 2010). Instead, we embrace a shared identity as practitioners of rhetoric rather than shared practices of work, research methods, pedagogical methods, or subject matter expertise. Applied rhetoric provides the flexibility and adaptability that Teresa Henning and Amanda Bemer (2016) suggest are "fundamentally linked to a technical communicator's power" (p. 325) and important factors in career satisfaction and career health. Ironically, the shift towards applied rhetoric also provides a measure of stability for a scholar's career: our theory, our pedagogy, our methods, and our boundaries may shift, but the underlying theme of using rhetorical theory and strategies to solve problems remains constant. If we acknowledge the rhetorical thread that connects our work, we can more easily see how our research might intersect or how findings in one area, like rhetoric of science and medicine, might help practitioners or teachers in another, like business communication. Rhetoric is the mother tongue that we use to talk about our work.

■ Applied Rhetoric as *Doing* Rhetoric

Beyond the flexibility and adaptability inherent in the term, applied rhetoric emphasizes that rhetorical theory must be brought to bear onto something else—some activity, reality, or materiality that may or may not appear to be rhetorical at first glance—for a specific purpose. This differentiation between the theoretical and the practical is reminiscent of a debate in the field of technical communica-

tion that caused quite a stir in the 1980s. It began with Carolyn Miller's (1979) article "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing" and Elizabeth Harris' (1979) article "Applications of Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse* to Technical Writing," both in the same issue of *College English*. Those essays provoked a response from Elizabeth Tebeau (1980), in which she claimed that the theoretical approaches to curriculum design advocated by Miller and Harris "ignore the purely pragmatic topics and problems that must be emphasized in the course" (p. 823). Both Miller (1980) and Harris (1980) responded to Tebeau's criticism by claiming that she overemphasized the role that industry practice should have in the development of course material and underappreciated the role that rhetorical and linguistic theory should have in that development. And so began (or continued) the debates between the practical and the theoretical—the industry and the academy—in technical writing.

While these debates still exist within technical writing and other related disciplines, rhetorical theory has often been used to try to bridge the gap. Miller's (1989) "What's Practical About Technical Writing?" offers the beginnings of an answer in the Aristotelian concept of praxis, which she identifies as a middle ground between theory and practice, informed by both and, hopefully, working to shape both. Patricia Sullivan and James Porter (1993) define praxis as "a 'practical rhetoric' focused on local writing activities (practice), informed by as well as informing general principles (theory)" (p. 226). Similarly, J. Blake Scott and Lisa Melonçon (2017) propose the concept of *techne*—the combination of theoretical principles and practical knowledge in a stable, yet highly contingent foundation for ethical, rhetorical conduct—as a way to guide the development of the discipline. And, Robert R. Johnson (2010) combines the practical and theoretical by acknowledging the dual telos of *techne*: the end product as well as the use of that product. In fact, he claims that the products produced through *techne* "are essentially inert until they are placed into use" (p. 677). Each of these approaches emphasizes application of rhetorical theory to specific, unique contexts and phenomena. Through that application, both theory and practice develop and evolve.

By embracing the moniker of applied rhetoric, we embrace this idea of praxis and continue to extend it beyond curricular concerns. Miller (1989) argues that theory should inform practice through the curriculum by training students to be critically aware professionals, but that's not the only (or even the most effective) way we can engage with practice. The various disciplines that applied rhetoric covers already have a long history of reaching beyond the academy in attempts to merge theory and practice. For instance, scholars in technical and professional communication have often partnered with or engaged with industry as sites of research (see Faber, 2002a; Spinuzzi, 2003; Winsor, 2003; Zachry & Thralls, 2007), and the scholarship of civic and public rhetoric often engages directly or indirectly with community-based programs (see Ackerman & Coogan, 2010; Blythe et al., 2008; Deans et al., 2010; Flower, 2008; Grabill, 2006; Simmons, 2007). The inaugural issue of *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine (RHM)* acknowl-

edges that the purpose of that discipline is “to engage and inform other fields and extra-academic practices” (Melonçon & Scott, 2018, p. v), so much so that the journal makes room for outward-facing scholarship such as persuasion briefs and dialogues with stakeholders outside of the academy. By analyzing and engaging with the actual application of rhetoric, *RHM* is applied rhetoric. Thinking of these various discourse communities as applied rhetoric suggests (perhaps even demands) that these collaborations across departments, across disciplines, and especially with practitioners outside of the academy become more intentional and more central to our work.

In the past decade, technical and professional communication has also seen a turn towards the “wicked problem,” a poorly defined, complex problem that cannot be solved with a simple response; indeed, the problem is often redefined as new solutions are offered (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Though the concept was originally developed for public policy planning work, it has been adopted within technical and professional communication as a response to communication challenges involving audiences with multiple, often competing, needs. The continual redefinition required by wicked problems also aligns with cultural studies approaches to technical communication, particularly Slack et al.’s (1993) argument that technical communicators continually make and remake meaning within the deliverables they create. More, wicked problems frequently require the perspectives of scholars and practitioners from multiple disciplines (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

The concept of wicked problems has continued to frame several topics within technical and professional communication. Jeffrey M. Gerding and Kyle P. Vealey (2017) incorporate work in entrepreneurship, civic and public rhetorics, and technical communication to argue for what they call “hybrid solutions” to wicked problems that appeal to investors’ need for stability and address the evolving nature of the problems (p. 333). More recently, Brock Carlson (2019) described the situations facing community organizers in Appalachia as wicked problems that can best be addressed using local knowledges and nonstandard communication strategies. Most often, though, the wicked problems framework has been applied to issues related to environmental communication, including the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill along the U.S. Gulf Coast (Wickman, 2014), a reconceptualization of scientists as *audiences* for science communication (McKiernan & Steinbergs, 2016), and a community-focused study of how individuals can be persuaded to believe and act in accordance with climate science (Shirley, 2019).

Despite the possibilities in the turn towards wicked problems, we argue that the concept is rooted too deeply in the problems themselves to be a useful umbrella for the work we do in our field. As its name suggests, it is also deeply rooted in *complex, ever-changing* problems. The umbrella of applied rhetoric, however, allows a focus on *resolution* or, at least, *mitigation* to any problems that are posed, rather than on the problems themselves, and the ability to tackle problems without worrying about their complexity or scope. Though many scholars are indeed focused on wicked problems, many prefer to focus on smaller, local problems that

can be solved through rhetoric: resolving the contradictions posed by local pet rescue policies, advocating for environmental changes through rhetorical story maps, or leading a faculty development center at a university. Using applied rhetoric as an umbrella includes those scholars working on either type of problem, or on the multitude of problems that could exist between the two.

As a disciplinary umbrella, applied rhetoric allows us to focus on the cyclical engagement between theory and practice in the way that the necessarily practical discipline of rhetoric should. Jeffrey T. Grabill (2006) claims that practice-driven rhetorical research requires that “usefulness become a primary epistemological, ethical, and political value” (p. 162). Prioritizing the usefulness of rhetoric at a disciplinary level allows us to learn from each other’s successes and failures at engaging our students; our colleagues, disciplines, and institutions; our corporate, nonprofit, and government partners; and our communities and publics in the work of rhetoric. Together, we move within and outside of the academy to improve the ways that rhetoric is used for its various, nearly unlimited ends. Herndl and Cutlip (2013) say this kind of move toward praxis allows the rhetoric of science, technology, and medicine to “flourish as a participant in interdisciplinary research projects in which rhetoric functions as a significant contributor to research, outreach, and policy formation” (p. 4), allowing the discipline’s scholars to “move from talking about science to doing science” (p. 7). As a framework, applied rhetoric thus creates a space for scholars to move from *talking* about rhetoric to actually *doing* rhetoric.

By focusing on the doing of rhetoric, we allow our work to move beyond the academy and positively affect the communities we study, and we allow them to affect us, as well. Here, too, we’re not the first to make this argument. The disciplines within rhetorical studies have a long history of engaging with various publics. Ellen Cushman (1996) argues that “in doing our scholarly work, we should take social responsibility for the people from and with whom we come to understand a topic” (p. 11) by contributing the resources of our positions to help “people disrupt the status quo of their lives with language and literacy” (p. 13). And, David J. Coogan and John M. Ackerman (2010) argue that

communities can benefit from the increased attention of rhetoricians in pursuit of democratic ideals, but rhetoric can also benefit from community partnerships premised on a negotiated search for the common good—from a collective labor to shape the future through rhetoric in ways that are mutually empowering and socially responsible. (pp. 1-2)

Sometimes called “participatory action research” (Sullivan & Porter, 1997), this type of mutually beneficial partnership between scholars and communities is one example of the kind of work we think about when we envision a future for applied rhetoric. Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Kirk Riley (2008) envision another in their “critical action research” where they conduct research “on behalf

of citizens rather than with them” (p. 276). In either case, by engaging with communities within academic, civic, and other public contexts, applied rhetoric is the more “expansive, collaborative, and consequential way” of thinking about rhetoric that Caroline Gottschalk Druschke (2014) encourages for the rhetoric of science, but applied rhetoric allows us to think that way about the rhetoric involved in nearly any discipline or context because rhetoric is a “transdisciplinary, emplaced, engaged field by its very nature” (Druschke, 2014, p. 6).

That kind of extension of work, though, comes with a certain responsibility. Carolyn R. Miller (1989) references the concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, as integral to praxis. In Aristotelian terms, the focus of praxis is on good, effective conduct, so the reasoning appropriate to praxis is that which “necessarily concerns both universals and particulars: it applies knowledge of human goods to particular circumstances” (Miller, 1989, p. 22). Johnson (2010) goes as far as to say that the ancients would consider it unthinkable to remove *techne* from cultural and ethical contexts. Applied rhetoric thus requires us to inhabit a middle ground between an overreliance on either theory or practice to guide our judgment. We must analyze each situation as a unique opportunity for rhetoric, a unique opportunity for “arguing in a prudent way toward the good of the community” (Miller, 1989, p. 22). Many scholars are already doing this difficult work, and across quite different areas. For example, research that seeks to understand how and why vaccine refusal communities find anti-vaccination rhetoric persuasive can be used to develop strategies for public practitioners and scholars for compassionate, effective communication with these communities (Campeau, 2019; Lawrence, 2020; Scott et al., 2015). Scholars can work with government entities to improve the credibility of their websites through usability testing (Youngblood & Youngblood, 2013; Youngblood, 2018), improve public planning processes with rhetorical listening strategies (Moore & Elliott, 2015), and improve communication among deployed service members (Mallory, 2019).

This work does not always show up in peer-reviewed scholarship, though. We see examples of public practice in social media posts that popularize the idea of students going to faculty office hours and share examples of how to reach out to faculty if students need help (e.g., Wise, 2020); in offering free resume review services through the local library for community members; in helping a university better communicate to its students via usability testing; in leading the way on organizational policies that support activist movements and civil rights; and in many, many more public-facing situations.

Applied rhetoric can thus “inform and ameliorate” practice (Melonçon & Scott, 2018, p. v). While all rhetoric is practical in the sense that the methods of rhetoric must be brought to bear onto something else, applied rhetoric is a useful term for our work because it allows rhetoric and rhetors the opportunity to make a difference within our communities. Our efforts lead to practice, particularly public practice. In this way, we are returning to the earliest roots of rhetoric in that our efforts are outwardly focused to influence the societies and communities in which we live.

■ Conclusion

It's clear that we are not the first nor the only group to use the term applied rhetoric, nor even the first to attempt to establish a disciplinary umbrella for scholars with ties to rhetoric. Given the history and scholarship we have reviewed here, one might simply think that we're joining a Greek chorus. (Pardon the pun.) But through these symposia, this organization, and even this chapter, we hope to help bring the term into widespread use. We view applied rhetoric as being uniquely positioned to clarify ideas that help people accomplish things, to explicitly connect research to teaching, and to be a force for good in the world. Not all scholars or practitioners of technical or business communication may identify as rhetoricians, but it is clearly the tie that binds us together.

Rhetoric is an action, one that scholars and practitioners alike perform because all communication is inherently rhetorical. Miles A. Kimball (2017) proposed that the skills we often associate with technical communication are essential skills for . . . well, everyone. As Blyler (1993) suggested, the crucial knowledge is to be able to identify and respond to contextual issues of workplace documents, understand how documents express communal values and expectations, and adapt messages and strategies to a variety of situations. Effective communication isn't the result of hunches, habits, talent, or luck. Rhetorical theory legitimizes the rationale for decisions about what works and why (Hart-Davidson, 2001), and it is not limited to those who identify as technical communicators. In fact, while we're talking about what technical communication is (or is not), the rest of the world is just doing it. They are writing product reviews (Mackiewicz, 2011), answering questions on message boards (Frith, 2014), creating YouTube tutorials (Chong, 2018), and pitching new businesses (Roundtree, 2016).

Through our work with the quasiprofessional Applied Rhetoric Collaborative, we are casting a wide net to create "a community of like-minded people who share professional interests but also enjoy one another's company" (Carliner, 2012, p. 62). By including the broad fields of technical and business communication, communication studies, and specialized areas like rhetoric of science, rhetoric of economics, risk and crisis communication, social media rhetorics, and more, applied rhetoric is the most accurate and inclusive term for our field because it references our shared rhetorical foundations and allows for a breadth of topics and methodological approaches. After all, to expand our own horizons, we should routinely interact with people who are doing other things.

Rhetoric is, by its nature, a practical art, an applied method. We use theory. We question theory. We develop theory. But we do those things by examining rhetoric as it is applied in various contexts. We hope this perspective will work to inspire conversation and innovate rhetorical practice across those various contexts. Let that be the legacy of applied rhetoric—a cross-disciplinary revival of rhetoric's ancient practical purpose.

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