A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Technical Communication

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TEACHING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION can be a fun and rewarding experience, and it's an important and worthy endeavor. By teaching tech comm, you not only help advance the profession by training those who wish to enter the field, but you also help those who wish to enter other fields understand and appreciate the value of tech comm.

While teaching tech comm is a noble cause, it's also a lot of work. It requires many hours outside of the classroom, preparation, and patience. Class planning, office hours, late-night grading, mentoring, and responding to student questions takes a lot of time and isn't for the faint of heart. Weighing the tangible cost of time against the intangible reward of helping students become better writers, why would anyone teach tech comm? How does one begin teaching tech comm? And what are the challenges tech comm practitioners face in the classroom?

This article draws upon my own experience and informal conversations I've had with a handful of practitioners who teach part-time or who have transitioned into teaching full-time.

Assessing Your Interest

Why do you want to teach technical communication? This is the first question I ask when my tech comm friends approach me for advice. Knowing why someone wants to teach tech comm helps me assess their level of interest and gives me insight into what they know about the academic world. You might be interested in teaching tech comm for many reasons:

‣ You want to make a career change.
‣ You need more secure retirement benefits.
‣ You want to supplement your income.
‣ You genuinely desire to share your knowledge and experience with students.

Of the practitioners I've spoken to, their interest in teaching traverses some or all of these reasons. Let's consider each of them individually to help assess your interest.

You want to make a career change. While this is certainly a valid reason, you should ask yourself why you're drawn to teaching rather than instructional design, training, project management, or other areas related to tech comm. Are you trying to escape some unpleasantness in your current job, or are you really compelled to teach?

You need more secure retirement benefits. While most full-time and some part-time professor appointments offer excellent retirement benefits, they aren't as plentiful as they once were. Many professors contribute a sizable portion of their paychecks to their pensions and contribute additional funds to a 403(b), similar to a 401(k) in the United States, to supplement their retirement incomes.

You want to supplement your income. Teaching part-time will generate additional income that you can use to pay bills or stash in your retirement accounts. Teaching part-time or adjuncting, however, doesn't pay a lot for the amount of time required. The national average pay for adjuncts in the United States in 2010 was $2,700 per three-unit course (see "A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members"). This sounds like a lot of money, but when you consider the time spent in and out of the classroom, it's about $10 per hour (Wessler).

You genuinely desire to share your knowledge and experience with students. This is by far the best reason for considering teaching tech comm, and some might say it's the only reason. That passion for fostering the growth of new writers and editors will help sustain your patience and perseverance through late-night grading sessions, bureaucratic idiosyncrasies, and even apathetic students. Teaching is challenging work, and your tenacity and skills are the key ingredients to your success.

If you're still interested after this sobering assessment, let's discuss the various settings and types of teaching appointments that are available.

Breaking into Teaching

The path you take depends on where you are in your career, your education level, and your experiences. Based on these variables, you might want to teach in any of the following settings:

‣ Universities and colleges
‣ University extensions and continuing education venues
‣ Vocational Schools

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Universities and Colleges

Universities and colleges are the traditional academic setting. Technical communication classes are often offered as electives in business, engineering, mathematics, or other degree programs, or they are offered within a dedicated technical communication program. The courses may be offered by English, business, or engineering departments and are taught by tenure-track professors or adjunct faculty, often called lecturers or instructors.

Tenure-track faculty. Tenure-track positions are full-time appointments. They generally require a PhD in the field in which you want to teach. Tenure-track positions are becoming more and more rare as colleges and universities try to cut costs by relying on lower-paid, expendable adjuncts. With so few tenure-track positions open, you have to be willing to relocate to the states where the jobs are available. Candidates with academic backgrounds are favored, but it is possible to pick up a PhD later in life and transition into teaching. The tenure-track positions may also require that you teach some general education classes and will require you to participate in committees and student advising. Depending upon the school, you may be required to "publish or perish," meaning that you're continually conducting research and writing articles and books to burnish the university's reputation.

Adjunct (contingent) faculty. Adjunct faculty positions generally require a Master's degree. Adjuncts are often called contingent faculty because they're hired on a part-time, as-needed basis. You might want to adjunct if you want to keep your day job and teach a class a semester in the evenings. Adjuncts are paid significantly less than their tenure-track counterparts, but adjuncts aren't obliged to sit on committees, participate in governance, manage programs, or advise students. They are often obliged, however, to hold unpaid office hours. Because

the work is contingent, and you have no control over when classes are offered, you may need to work with your employer to accommodate your teaching schedule.

University Extensions and Continuing Education

Some tech comm courses and programs may be offered through a university's extension. These courses are designed for nontraditional students who have already started their careers or who are looking to start a second career. Classes are sometimes offered for credits, but are often offered for continuing education credits (CEUs), which aren't applicable to degree programs. Special courses may be designed for corporate clients and delivered on the work site. Instructors of extension courses are nonsalaried and are hired on a per-class basis. The pay varies greatly by institution.

Vocational Colleges

Vocational schools frequently offer tech comm or business communication courses. These courses are for vocational degrees, and the credits often don't transfer to other colleges and universities. The level of education and experience required vary greatly by school; some require a Bachelor's degree while others a Master's or PhD. The compensation for teaching varies dramatically from school to school, and vocational schools typically don't pay as well as the colleges and universities.

Gaining Experience

Now that you have an idea of the setting in which you'd like to teach and the level of education required to get there, you need to start building professional experiences that demonstrate engagement with the profession, knowledge of contemporary issues, and the ability to present information to an audience. Many of these suggestions are advisable of all practitioners even if they aren't interested in teaching tech comm.

Present at conferences like the STC Summit. Developing and presenting an engaging and contemporary topic at a regional or international conference is a great way to develop your skills as a researcher and presenter. Don't forget to write the paper for the conference proceedings so you have a published record of your topic. A proceedings paper is an article that covers the information presented at the conference and documents any research you conducted.

Present to STC chapters. You don't have to save all your great presentation ideas for conferences. Presenting to local STC chapters is great way to build your repertoire and sharpen your ability to answer challenging questions extemporaneously and think on your feet when your example doesn't resonate with the audience. Even the best-planned presentations can go awry, so it's a good idea to learn how to adapt.

Present to other professional organizations. If you're presenting to an STC chapter or to another organization, contact the local tech comm faculty and ask them to promote the event to their students. This will not only help give you more exposure, but it would benefit the students and chapter by building those connections.

Although, I placed heavy emphasis on giving presentations, this is not to say that presenting is the same as teaching. They're related in the same way a sprint is related to a triathlon. The presentation is one short part of the longer, sustained, and varied endeavor of teaching.

Flexing your presentation skills outside of the friendly confines of STC will help you learn to adapt to unfamiliar situations, people with varying attitudes toward technical communication, and different levels of familiarity with the topic. Presenting to other groups also helps strengthen your credibility as a presenter.

Contact the local university and offer to guest lecture. This is a great way to introduce yourself to the faculty at your local college or university. You can often find the faculty names in the schedule of classes and their email addresses in the campus directory online. Send the professor an email a few weeks prior to beginning of the semester, when he or she is likely to be putting the syllabus together. Name the course you're offering to speak at (you got the course title from the schedule of classes), list three to five topics you could speak on, and ask if there's any room in the class schedule for you to guest lecture. If you don't receive a response, don't feel bad—professors have a lot to do with few resources. Try again another semester.

Conduct workshops. Conducting a half-day or full-day workshop is the closest many practitioners get to teaching: you have a presentation that must be sustained over several hours, you have activities to reinforce the concepts you're teaching, and you often have a learning assessment at the end. You could conduct workshops for your employer, an STC chapter, or as part of a preconference event.

Publish articles. For a tenure-track position, you'd want to publish articles in a peer-reviewed journal like *Technical Communication*. For adjunct positions, publishing articles in professional magazines like *Intercom* certainly helps bolster your credibility. Like presentations, publishing articles demonstrates a certain level of engagement with the profession, your desire to continue to learn, and your desire to share your knowledge.

Projecting Yourself as an Instructor

Landing an academic job is very different from landing any other job, but there are some similarities. Don't forget the basics.

Develop a curriculum vitae. The curriculum vitae (CV), like your résumé, outlines your contact information, educational background, your work experiences, and accomplishments. In addition, your CV should also include details about your areas of interest, grants, honors, awards, publications, presentations, and professional memberships (see "Curricula Vitae (CVs) versus Resumes"). While you should distill your résumé down

to two pages, the details included in your CV may span several pages. For information on assembling a CV, check out the resources available through the Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue.

Start cultivating references. Networking and references are important to every job search, and academic positions are no different. Keep in touch with conference organizers, chapter leaders, and faculty for whom you've guest lectured.

Develop a portfolio of targeted writing samples. Some academic applications require writing samples. Literature professors would include research papers or journal articles. A tech comm professor might also include those items, but it might be more appropriate to include technical documents that show your proficiency in the field. Check with the department chair to find out what types of writing samples the committee would consider.

Getting Your Foot in The Door

One of the standard requirements on every faculty application is previous teaching experience. How do you gain experience if no one will hire you without experience? This is an age-old catch-22 situation. Your path to teaching tech comm depends upon where you are in your career and education, your publications and presentations, and how well the faculty know you. Here are some suggestions to help you get started.

Teach classes as a grad student. If you're enrolled as a graduate or PhD student, the best way to gain teaching experience (and reduce your tuition) is to become a teaching associate (TA). TAs teach lower-division classes under the supervision of a faculty member. While the syllabus and course materials are often prescribed to them, TAs lead the class discussion, grade the assignments and tests, and record final grades. There's limited funding for TAs, so it can be competitive.

Volunteer as a member of a tech comm program's advisory board. This one surprised me, but I know a few people who started teaching this way. Many tech comm programs have advisory boards that are comprised of industry leaders and practitioners who meet with the faculty regularly to explain what they expect students to know when they graduate and describe the current trends in the market. The faculty might explain the limitations of the program or state and institutional requirements to adjust the practitioners' expectations. Through this dialogue, the curriculum is regularly revised to address the needs of the market. Also through this dialogue, faculty and practitioners connect. When a class comes up that needs an instructor, the faculty may invite a promising advisory board member to teach it.

Reach out to your alma mater. If you made it through grad school and never had the opportunity to be a TA, reach out to some of your former professors. If you graduated within the past five years, and they remember you, they might be able help you figure out how deep the

adjunct pool is (whether they have enough classes for their current adjuncts, or whether they have too many).

Apply everywhere. If all else fails, play it by the numbers and apply everywhere you see an open position. This is particularly true if you're looking for a tenure-track position. Tenure-track searches are nation wide.

Apply to one place over and over again. This is a long shot, but it worked for me. If you apply to the adjunct pool every semester for several years, you might catch the department chair when a class suddenly becomes available.

If your teaching experience is a little thin, your associations with faculty members are critical. Establish those connections early by inviting faculty to presentations, offering to guest lecture, and volunteering to sit on the advisory board.

Preparing for Classes

Long before you ever set foot in the tech comm classroom, you need to prepare. Reading the literature on technical communication, gathering resources, and planning classes takes time, but it'll help you prepare to demonstrate lessons for interview panels and develop your classes when you when you're hired. The following suggestions will help you get started.

Read journal articles. STC's *Technical Communication*, IEEE's *Transactions on Professional Communication*, and ATTW's *Technical Communication Quarterly* are all dedicated to technical communication research. Subscriptions to these journals require that you become a member or pay a nominal fee. If you want to comb through past articles, they often reside in databases that are locked behind a paywall. Find out if your local public or university library has a subscription to these databases so you don't have to pull out your credit card each time you want to read an article.

Read technical communication textbooks. Pearson Higher Education, Oxford University Press, and Baywood Publishing Company each offer a wide range of tech comm textbooks. Since textbooks can be expensive, check your public or university library or find used copies online. Review texts to determine which seem to offer the best advice, are the best organized, and the most up to date. When you're evaluating textbooks for courses you're teaching, keep price and availability in mind for the sake of your students.

Gather examples of good and bad technical communication and add your notes. You'll need real-life examples to analyze and discuss in class. Collecting and evaluating these pieces takes time, so start early. Add notes or create a spreadsheet to catalog each piece and record your own thoughts so you can remember why you selected each item.

Look at course syllabi online. Plug popular course names into your favorite search engine and check out the syllabi that come up. Course requirements may vary drastically from school to school, but you can find such commonalities among them as which textbooks and articles

seem to be the most popular, which assignments seem to work, and which topics are the most prevalent.

Develop in-class projects. No one wants to sit through a three-hour lecture. No one can absorb all that information, nor should they sit still that long. In-class activities break up the time, engage the students, and reinforce lessons by giving students the opportunity to apply what they just heard or read. Developing in-class activities takes creativity and thoughtfulness, and your first ideas aren't usually your best. You might get ideas from colleagues or from books and articles.

Take a couple of classes. They could be tech comm classes, but they don't have to be. Preferably, take classes from different professors. What does each professor do well, and what could they improve on? Try to do well in the class, so you have an understanding of the struggles students face. Study the classroom dynamic as much as or more than the subject of the class. As a current student you'll have access to the university library and access to some of those textbooks and journal databases I mentioned earlier (well worth the price of tuition!).

Yes, I just assigned you a lot of homework here. You might try some of these suggestions while you're trying to get your foot in the door, but you'll try all of them at some point throughout your teaching career.

Reality Check

You've probably heard the pejorative expression, "Those who can't do teach," which infers that people pursue academic careers because they lack the skills to become practitioners. This statement couldn't be further from the truth. Teaching requires analytical and critical thinking, organization, and the ability to communicate difficult and abstract concepts. These skills overlap greatly with the skills required of practitioners. However, teaching also requires management, advanced presentation, and interpersonal skills to effectively manage a classroom, adapt to situations, and accommodate a wide range of learning abilities.

Practitioners need to understand that teaching a class is not the same as presenting at a conference. Teaching requires sustained long-term planning and preparation, specific learning objectives, adherence to institutional standards, and fair and detailed grading criteria.

Whether you want to pursue a tenure-track position or adjunct on top of your regular job, your skills as a tech comm practitioner, presenter, and author and your desire to share your knowledge with the next generation of tech comm professionals will prove to be key ingredients to your success in the classroom. 🛈

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RESOURCES   Here are a few of the resources mentioned throughout this article.

Curriculum Vitae

Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University, *https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/641/1*

Journals

Technical Communication. Society for Technical Communication (STC), *www.stc.org/publications/technical-communication*

Technical Communication Quarterly. Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), *www.attw.org/publications/tcq*

Transactions on Professional Communication. Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), *http://pcs.ieee.org/transactions-of-professional-communication*

Textbooks

Baywood Publishing Company, *https://baywood.com/books/BooksBySeries.asp?series=7*

Oxford University Press, *https://global.oup.com/ushe/disciplines/english/business-and-technical-writing-courses*

Pearson Higher Education, *http://www.pearsonhighered.com/educator/discipline/Technical-Communication/91000068.page*

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