Research Article

Community of Practice and Professionalization: Perspectives on Technical Communication in Ireland

—YVONNE CLEARY

Abstract—Research problem: In Ireland, technical communication has developed as an academic and occupational field since the late 20th century. Research on the field in Ireland is limited. Research questions: (1) To what extent do technical communicators in Ireland operate as a community of practice? (2) What steps are Irish technical communicators taking toward professionalization? Literature review: This study uses a theoretical framework that combines symbolic interactionism and communities of practice theories. While traditional Professionalization Theory uses a structural functionalist approach to the study of occupations, characterizing disciplines as professions depending on whether they meet certain traits (including autonomy, market closure, license to practice, and service orientation), symbolic interactionism prioritizes interactions among individuals. In this sense, it overlaps with the concerns of communities of practice. A community of practice involves a group of people working together, and creating meaning through their interactions. Studying an occupation through this lens foregrounds individual and community identity, and how that is formed and informed by work. Methodology: Mixed methods—a survey, focus groups, and interviews—were used to explore Irish technical communicators’ perceptions of aspects of their field: practice, education, value and status, and professional and community structures. Results: The findings indicate that Irish technical communicators exhibit traits of communities of practice (such as joint enterprise and shared repertoires). They also identify with their job title and practice. A key finding is that some Irish technical communicators have a keen appetite for community involvement. This enthusiasm notwithstanding, barriers to professionalization include low visibility of the role in Ireland, limited evidence of professionalizing activity, and the potential for career stagnation.

Index Terms—Community of practice, Ireland, practitioners, professionalization, technical communication.

INTRODUCTION

While texts in support of new technologies and procedures have existed for centuries, technical communication is a new occupational field, relative to more traditional occupations such as medicine and law. Johnson-Eilola and Selber [1, xxv] observe, that:

Although the roots of technical communication reach back over many centuries, technical communication as an identifiable profession emerged only during the middle of the last century.

In Ireland, technical communication developed as an academic and occupational field in the late 20th century as a consequence of the location of software and telecommunications companies in the country [2], coupled with unprecedented economic expansion. No previous research examines Irish technical communicators’ perspectives on their practice, education and training, status, and the community and professional structures that support their work. Indeed, technical communication is a little-known field of work in Ireland. This study aims to address the following research questions concerning the technical communication field in Ireland:

RQ1. To what extent do technical communicators in Ireland operate as a community of practice?

RQ2. What steps are Irish technical communicators taking toward professionalization?

This paper begins by setting out the theoretical framework, which encompasses aspects of both symbolic interactionism and community of practice theories. Next, it outlines the methodological approach, before presenting findings and offering interpretations of those findings. Finally, the paper points toward ways that technical communication can be developed in Ireland and indicates avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the early 1900s to the present, many studies have examined the characteristics of the professions. Since the 1980s, concerns of technical communication scholarship.
The purpose of this section is to explain the theoretical orientation of this study, which combines theories of communities of practice and symbolic interactionism. This section then reviews the literature on traditional and newer approaches to characterizing professions, including symbolic interactionism and communities of practice. Finally, it explores research into professionalization and communities of practice in technical communication.

**Theoretical Orientation** Because technical communication is a new occupational field in Ireland, it is not readily understood by outsiders and, therefore, requires an exploratory research approach. The study described in this paper examines technical communication in Ireland from a perspective that combines symbolic interactionism and communities of practice theories. It conceives technical communicators in Ireland as workers in a rapidly evolving field, whose perceptions of that field depend on: their interactions (with one another and with other fields); the process of community formation; and the meanings they attribute to their practice and their roles. MacDonald and Evett agree that symbolic interactionism encourages researchers to examine individual and collective actions within an occupation, and to explore how these actions alter the status of the occupation. In this sense, the study's focus is on what Carliner terms quasiprofessionalization, “rooted in professional identity rather than an exclusive right to perform work.” This study confines its analysis to four prominent intersections between symbolic interactionism and communities of practice: theories: practice; education and training; status and legitimacy of the field; and professional and community structures that support practitioners.

Gorman and Sandefur note that while intellectual inquiry into the sociology of the professions has stagnated since the “Golden Age” of the mid-20th century, nevertheless much interdisciplinary scholarly work continues in areas relevant to professionalization. They argue that “Interest is no longer confined to the traditional professions, nor are researchers particularly concerned with policing the boundaries of the concept of ‘profession’ and excluding occupations that do not qualify.” They see various strands of professionalization research cohering around four central concerns: “expert knowledge, autonomy, a normative service orientation supported by community, and high status, income and rewards.”

**Selection of Literature for the Review** In conducting my literature review, I examined existing literature on professionalization, symbolic interactionism, communities of Practice Theory, and professionalization and communities of practice in technical communication. I also identified literature based on previous research I had conducted on related topics. Key words included: profession, professionalization, communities of practice, symbolic interactionism, and technical communication.

**Symbolic Interactionism and Communities of Practice:** At critical junctures in their development, occupations often strive for the status, authority, and power that professionalization affords. While the literature sometimes refers to professionalization as a process, the steps that lead an occupation to become a profession are not outlined or explained within the traditional “traits” approach to conceiving professions, known as structural functionalism. The traits approach lists the characteristics of an ideal-typical profession against which actual examples of occupational groups could then be assessed as more or less professional.

This approach can engage members of an occupation to work to bring about changes and increase agency among practitioners. Although scholars in many fields, including technical communication, continue to explore practice using this professionalization model, others argue that this type of professionalization research has become “quietsent.” In the introduction to The Sociology of the Professions, MacDonald describes a “sea change” in how professions were perceived; from the 1970s onward, the orientation switched from structural functionalist studies, to critiques based on the power of professions, to action-based research on professional occupations, called “symbolic interactionism”. This perspective, which emerged from the Chicago School of Sociology, is more concerned with human action and interaction within an occupation than with criteria (or traits) that constitute a profession. It takes as its subject matter the actions and interactions of individuals and groups, how they constituted their social worlds as participants, and how they constructed their careers.

Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society* introduced some concepts of symbolic interactionism by describing
interdependencies between individuals and social structures. Blumer [9] extended the concepts into a methodological position. According to his explanation of symbolic interactionism, people respond to things based on their perceptions of meaning, and those meanings depend on social interaction and individual and collective interpretations [9]. In the context of professions, this perspective shifts attention away from earlier hegemonic approaches and emphasizes human beings and communities.

Symbolic interactionism aligns with communities of Practice Theory, which foregrounds how people interact with one another in their practice, and how those interactions shape their understanding of their practice [10]. Members of a community of practice work together to make sense of what they are required to do (implicitly and explicitly) in a work setting. Wenger explores aspects of practice from a community perspective, identifying four interlinked components: community, practice, identity, and meaning. He explains the links between symbolic interactionism and communities of practice [10, p. 283]: “theories of practice place the emphasis on what people do and how they give meaning to their actions and to the world through everyday engagement.” He acknowledges Blumer, Mead, and Goffman in influencing his thought on “situatedness of experience” [10, p. 281]. The common concerns of both symbolic interactionism and communities of practice cohere around how communities are formed and developed, what it means to do a particular job, and how professional identity is defined. These are important aspects to consider for technical communication research, particularly in regions where workplace studies of the field do not exist.

**Professionalization and Communities of Practice in Technical Communication:** Technical communicators sometimes struggle to express the value of their work [11], [12], and studies from the US examine the possibilities of increasing the status of the field, including through professionalization [13], [14]. Researchers have explored the claims that technical communication makes to professional status, the benefits of professional status for the field, and the steps that technical communication needs to take to assert itself as a profession [13]–[18]. A two-volume edited collection *Power and Legitimacy in Technical Communication* [17], [18] tackles the historical and contemporary struggle for professionalization, and examines strategies for attaining professional status. Since the chapters are by veteran technical writing scholars who have devoted much of their careers to understanding, teaching, studying, and promoting the field, these volumes constitute a strong contribution to a maturing discipline. A recent two-volume special issue of the Technical Communication journal focused on current research on professionalization within the field. Work continues in developing and expanding the technical communication body of knowledge (TCBOK) as one of several indicators of a coherent profession [15], [19]. This type of scholarship is an important anchor within a field that is rapidly and constantly changing.

While much of the research about the field of technical communication is North American, recent work has begun to explore intercultural contexts (see, for example, [20]), particularly with an emphasis on globalization. Technical communicators work in globalized workplaces, and need to adapt to changing economic and technological environments.

Savage [21, p. 162] accepts that professionalization may not be a desirable goal for all practitioners but argues that “those who would reject professionalization ... should endeavor to articulate possibilities for real alternatives.” One potential alternative is a community-centered vision of the field. Fisher and Benion [22, p. 277] argue that within the “complex and dynamic environment” of technical communication, “‘community’ is emerging as a critical element both in supporting individual professional development and in developing the future of the profession itself.” Many of the features and functions of communities of practice are common to symbolic interactionism. For example, Kline and Barker [23, p. 24] explain that communities of practice foster professional consciousness, especially in a field like technical communication with “a diversity or dichotomy of professionals.” Redish [24] notes that communities of practice provide support, enable cross-functional interactions, foster new ideas, and enable technical communicators to network. Ilyasova and Birkelo [25, p. 120] argue that communities of practice are important for technical communicators because they help them “to realize knowledge transfer, to facilitate communication, and to enact changes.”

This study explores the field of technical communication in terms of human action and interaction, and conceives technical communicators as agents who, through mutual interaction, assign meaning to their practice.
METHODOLOGY

The study described in this paper explores the nature of the work of technical communicators in Ireland, using primarily qualitative, interpretative approaches to help elucidate current perspectives on the field of work. The study methods and analytical procedures explore symbolic interactions, by emphasizing the experiences, interactions, and perspectives of the technical communicators who participated. This section starts with an explanation of the choice of research methodology; it then provides information about the selection of participants, and explains how the data were collected and analyzed.

Choice of a Research Methodology. The study is exploratory because no previous studies have examined the Irish context for technical communication. The paradigm aligns with Blumer's [9, p. 40] description of the methodological position of symbolic interactionism, a flexible but directed inquiry, beginning with a broad focus that “becomes progressively sharpened as inquiry proceeds.” Conklin and Hayhoe [26] observe that qualitative studies are very suited to the field of technical communication, are appropriate for studies of practice, and are accessible to practitioners. As such, this study aims to contribute to strategic knowledge rather than “scientific knowledge” [27]. Data were gathered initially through a survey, followed by online focus groups, and, finally, through face-to-face interviews.

Participants. This study design received approval from the local institutional research board, as required for all research involving human participants. The sampling procedure I followed for the initial survey and subsequent online focus groups was nonprobability convenience sampling. Technical communicators for whom I have contact details and technical communicators who subscribe to mailing lists were most likely to receive an invitation to participate in the survey, and subsequent online focus group discussions. I exhorted recipients of the message to forward it to technical communication colleagues (a technique known as snowball sampling). The sample cannot be said, therefore, to represent the full population of Irish technical writers, which is in any case unknown.

The sampling procedure for the semistructured interviews was purposive, judgment sampling. Interviewees were contacted based on their different work profiles and my judgments about their ability to contribute to the study. The procedure was also a form of theoretical sampling since I selected individuals for interviews based on their potential ability to contribute to an emerging theory [28]. I sought to interview workers in a variety of roles and companies.

How Data Were Collected

Data Source 1: Survey. The questionnaire for this study was designed using an online survey design tool and was distributed to respondents via an email invitation to participate. The survey began with an introduction outlining the purpose of the research, the researcher's contact details, and details of institutional research board approval. It consisted of 20 questions organized into five sections: demographics, current or most recent role, career trajectory, education and training background, and professional involvement. Its purpose was to elicit baseline demographic and occupational information. In addition, open-ended questions explored respondents' understanding of technical communication. It concluded with an invitation to respondents to join an online group if they wished to participate in subsequent focus group discussions. The survey link remained open for two weeks, and I sent one email reminder to participants to request participation during this period.

Data Source 2: Focus Groups. Blumer recommends discussion groups as part of the symbolic interactionism methodology: such a group, discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it ... will do more to lift the veils covering the sphere of life than any other device that I know of. [9, p. 41]

The aims of the focus group discussions were to cross-validate survey data, and seek richer attitudinal and behavioral information on areas such as the day-to-day work of writers, their perceptions of their roles, and their professional interactions (for example, with other technical writers, with colleagues, and across organizations). Savage notes that “the emergence of a sense of professional identity may be a necessary first phase of professionalization” [21, p. 144]. The focus groups also explored questions of education, and the boundaries and organizational contexts of technical communication practice. A further objective of the focus groups was to encourage and
provide a forum for practitioners to reflect on their work, community, and field.

The online environment ensured that more people could participate in the discussions since neither geography nor cost would be a factor. These focus groups were asynchronous, because I could not guarantee that all participants could participate at the same time. A disadvantage of asynchronous discussions is that they lack the dynamic, “spontaneous, real-time interaction” [29, p. 70] that typifies face-to-face focus groups. However, they have the advantage of including members who cannot participate at a set time, and of allowing participants time for reflection and careful, critical thinking.

The first discussion topic centered on career paths of participants. Its aim was to follow up on related survey questions about career progression, and to gather more in-depth information about participants’ perceptions of their career structure and their commitment to the field. This topic also explored the link between education and careers.

The second discussion topic focused on professional organizations. While the survey gathered basic data about membership in professional organizations and communities, this discussion examined the reasons for joining (or not joining), and explored other participant contributions to the field.

The third topic investigated participants’ perceptions of the value and status of the field of technical communication. This topic had not been explored explicitly in the survey.

The fourth topic discussed the day-to-day work of participants, attempting to explore commonalities and role diversity. It also looked at the job titles of participants and examined their conceptualizations of the field. This topic followed up on survey questions regarding the skill set of technical communicators and their definitions of the field.

Data Source 3: Interviews: I followed up on the online discussions by conducting nine face-to-face audio-recorded interviews with technical communicators and technical communication team managers. Blumer [9, p. 41] explains the value of interviewing experts in a field from a symbolic interactionism perspective:

One should sedulously seek participants in the sphere of life who are acute observers and who are well informed. One such person is worth a hundred others who are merely unobservant participants.

The purpose of the interviews was to gather qualitative in-depth data on the subjective experiences of interviewees in relation to their career histories, education, and practice, and to examine their perceptions of the status of technical communication. A secondary purpose was to query their interest in and contributions to professionalization and community building.

For this study, the interview themes were educational background, career history, current work, and perspectives on practice, profession, and community. I compiled 30 questions to guide each interview and to ensure some consistency across interviews. I contacted interviewees by email to request participation, and to organize practical details, such as date, time, and location. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. I subsequently transcribed the data. Following the interviews, I invited interviewees to contact me if they wished to review their transcripts.

How the Data Were Analyzed Data-analysis techniques for this study were in keeping with the standards for analyzing qualitative research. While the study did not produce generalizable quantitative data, survey findings reveal quantities (such as numbers of job titles, gender and age ranges of survey respondents, numbers of respondents belonging to professional societies, and so on). The tool used to design and distribute the web-based survey questionnaire facilitated basic data reporting. Data were imported into a spreadsheet program for further analysis. For the focus group discussions and interviews, I used an interpretative content analysis strategy. Using this approach, I coded survey and discussion forum data by assigning a number to each respondent. Through immersion in the data set, I developed a list of categories relevant to the major themes under discussion. This process was necessarily iterative.

Assuring Credibility and Trustworthiness The methods involved both data and methodological triangulation. The methodological triangulation attempted to represent, through the three instruments, variables within the domains of symbolic interactionism and communities of practice that would help to answer the research questions and that would help to indicate symbols to which practitioners affix meaning. Blumer [9, p.
89] believes that analysis of data through this lens must recognize “human beings as they are, namely as persons constructing individual and collective action through an interpretation of the situations which confront them.”

RESULTS

This section presents and discusses the results from the survey, focus group discussions, and interviews. It begins with a summary of who participated in the study, followed by a thematic discussion focusing on technical communication practice in Ireland, technical communication education in Ireland, an analysis of findings on value and status, and an analysis of findings on professional and community structures.

Who Participated in the Study A total of 114 respondents (51 male and 63 female) who work or have worked in Ireland in technical communication or related disciplines completed the survey. Most worked in private industry (80%) on permanent contracts (78%). Just over 10% were self-employed, 7% worked for public bodies, and 3% were unemployed. The participants who worked in private industry functioned primarily in three types of workplace: as writers working in dedicated technical communication service companies, as lone writers in software or telecommunications firms, and as information developers working in large technical writing teams in multinational companies.

The online space used for the focus group discussions had 39 members for the duration of the study. Member profiles indicated roughly equal numbers of men and women in the group. Almost half of all group members worked for large multinational computing or software companies. Others were lone writers in software companies, employees of technical communication service companies, and freelance technical communicators. I invited group members to participate in any discussions of interest to them. Just four men and three women participated in the discussions; men participated much more actively than women. Notably, all participants in these discussions worked as freelancers or as lone writers in small companies, possibly because company policy prevented employees of multinational corporations from publicly airing any views which might compromise corporate confidentiality, as also evidenced in studies by Ardichvili et al. [30] and Chiu et al. [31].

Nine technical communicators were interviewed for this study. I interviewed two managers and two technical communicators from large multinational corporations based in Ireland. These corporations employ teams of technical communicators. A small number of dedicated technical writing service companies operate in Ireland, either hiring freelance technical communicators or employing writers full-time to work on diverse contracts. I interviewed two owners of such companies, one who has worked as a technical writer since the 1970s, and one who established his business in the past 10 years. The other three interviewees were:

1. A freelance writer
2. A technical writer who had moved from software engineering into technical communication
3. A lone writer who worked from home.

Interviewee backgrounds emphasize the many paths from which technical communicators come to the field in Ireland, including translation and localization, engineering, and mathematical sciences. This situation reflects Savage and Sullivan’s [32, p. 1] assertion that technical communicators “enter the profession through various doors.”

Discussion of the Findings This section discusses the findings, situates them within the theoretical framework, and compares them to related studies of technical communication professionalization and communities. It begins with an overview of technical communication in Ireland. It then analyzes the study findings through the lenses of practice, education, value and status, as well as community and professional structures.

Technical Communication Practice in Ireland: Until the mid-20th century, Ireland was a largely agrarian society. The country did not have a history or tradition of technical writing in support of manufacturing industries such as was evident in the US, the UK, and Germany. The industrial revolution had only a limited impact on Irish economic development, and in only a small number of sectors, notably brewing and linen [33]. Technical communication developed as an academic and occupational field in the late 20th century because of the location of software and telecommunications companies in the country [2]. Ireland’s economic success in the 1990s and early 2000s was a result of foreign direct investment, especially in the area of software [34]. Despite the relative newness of the field in Ireland, the findings from this study indicate that Irish technical communication contexts are similar to those of
their colleagues in other countries. For example, most of the writers who contributed to Savage and Sullivan’s Writing a Professional Life [32] worked in various sectors of the computing industry.

Employees and managers from two technical communication service companies participated in the study. The existence of such companies may indicate a move toward commoditization of technical communication. When technical communicators are laid off, the work is often undertaken by contractors who work for companies specializing in technical communication. Three interviewees also supported this contention, by suggesting that short-term contracts are “recession-proof,” and indeed, contracts may be more easily come by during a recession when permanent writers are laid off but documentation needs persist within an organization. One interviewee who runs a technical writing services company believed that “there’s a trend away from full-time on-site jobs.”

This study suggests, as others have done (see, for example, [35]) that technical communicators are aware of the potential consequences of corporate restructuring. In the 1990s and early 2000s, multinational companies off-shored software and related functions to Ireland, resulting in inward investment and increased employment. The practice of off-shoring is designed to reduce costs. Therefore, as employment costs have increased in Ireland, many companies which once off-shored operations to Ireland have begun to relocate to countries where labor costs are lower. Many Irish technical communicators are insecure about Ireland’s ability to compete with locations such as China and India, as evidenced by the following quotes:

“Is all technical writing going to move to India in the next 10 years?!” [Discussion Forum Respondent [DFR]].

“I guess our biggest threat is that they will set up a team somewhere else like India.” [DFR].

“And there’s off-shoring as well. Like anything, quality is always impacted, but they don’t do it for quality, they do it for costs.... Will tech writers still exist? Yes. Will they be Polish? Probably. We have Polish writers. We have Chinese writers. I always said localization as a function was under threat from off-shoring, but writing wasn’t. That’s no longer true.” [Interviewee].

Nevertheless, the two managers of technical teams who were interviewed see Ireland as retaining a competitive advantage, primarily because of the base of educated native English speakers.

The relative homogeneity of definitions of technical communication provided by survey respondents appears to indicate a shared understanding of the role requirements and is consistent with Wenger’s [10] articulation of a “shared repertoire” among members of a community of practice. It also indicates common symbols (communication, information, audience) that practitioners identify as most important in their practice. The following definitions of technical communicator are provided by respondents:

“Someone who can portray information that is easily understood by the relevant audience.”

“Someone who can convey complex technical information in a way that is suitable for comprehension by the target audience.”

“A professional communicator who possesses the ability to convey technical information in a clear, concise and unambiguous manner to an audience with varying levels of technical understanding.... One who conveys usable and understandable technical information to an audience.”

“Someone who communicates technical material in an easy to understand way.”

This homogeneity may, however, be a result of many of the respondents having a similar educational background and having studied technical communication in the same university. These definitions align substantially with those offered by experts in the field and with definitions from professional organizations. (See [36] for an example.)

Conversely, respondents had differing views on the skills needed by technical communicators. Just 56% specified a need for writing skills, for example, while 36% referred to a need for technical aptitude. Respondents had various job titles, including (different levels of): technical writer (39%) and information developer (15%), in addition to titles that reflect increasing digitization (for example, digital editor and web content strategist). Their job titles also imply a career path (for example, from technical writer, to senior technical writer, to technical writing manager). Analysis of the discussions shows that although a nominal career path is evident, few managerial positions exist. One
participant discussed career progression from the perspective of increasing role diversity, rather than from a hierarchical perspective:

“I’ve noticed a change in our department in the past few years in that they now consult me on wording in UIs a lot, almost always in fact. I love doing it and I think most writers can contribute a lot here. We are often much better at putting ourselves in the shoes of the user than the engineers.”

He concluded by arguing that “defining the duties of a tech writer can promote a clearer career path.”

Another focus group participant agreed that defining technical communication as a unique professional field could improve career prospects.

“I think we need to develop our skills such that an organization perceives the skills of a technical writer as being truly unique and genuinely useful.”

Orr [37, p. 14] notes of service work that there is “no typical day.” This epithet is true of many jobs, and the technical communicators who participated in this study agree that their work is varied and that flexibility is very important. Giammona [16, p. 351] argues that “the role and importance of the technical communicator has been changing over the last few years in most organizations. We are becoming more than writers.” The findings of this study emphasize writing as just one—but the core—component of the technical writer’s arsenal of skills.

The breadth of responses to the survey question: “What skills do you think all technical communicators need to have?” indicates how varied the role is. Practitioners revealed the multiple tasks that a technical communicator must master, including writing, communicating with developers and subject matter experts, planning, research, editing, information and graphic design, structured authoring, interaction design, aspects of interface design, and the myriad new media roles that are increasingly necessary. The interviews and focus group discussions indicate that the role may vary from workplace to workplace depending on the type of team and the writer’s level within the team.

*Technical Communication Education in Ireland:* As frameworks that describe and analyze the study of work, the professionalization and community of practice models have many intersections but also points of divergence. A significant difference is in their respective positions on the importance of formal academic qualifications. In traditional professions, a specified degree or other qualification is seen as strategically important, both for circumscribing the skill set, and for market closure. Freidson [38, p. 102] describes “the importance of professional schooling in shaping the economic and cultural status of professionals, the former referring to income and the latter to prestige.” Wenger’s [10] description of the communities of practice model, conversely, posits that effective practice depends on reification, often through nontraditional educational experiences. He considers formal education to be the most significant in its capacity to contribute to identity formation.

In this study, just over 60% of survey respondents had completed an academic program in technical communication, most of those citing an academic qualification at certificate, diploma, or master’s level from the University of Limerick. Male and female respondents were equally likely to have academic qualifications in technical communication. More than 60% had recently undertaken training courses, in three broad areas: training in tools and technologies; training in writing, copy editing, and information design techniques; and training in soft skills, such as management and interpersonal communication. This high percentage of participants with technical communication academic qualifications does not mirror the situation in other countries. For example, Conklin and Hayhoe [26, p. 379] observe that the subscriber base of the *Technical Communication* journal “consists overwhelmingly of people who do not have degrees in technical communication and for whom the profession is a second or subsequent career.” The discrepancy may be accounted for by the fact that I have taught most of the people who qualified in Ireland over the past decade, and those graduates who received an invitation may have been more likely to complete the survey because they knew me. The high percentage may also reflect the fact that technical communication is a new discipline in Ireland, with a relatively young workforce of individuals who have qualified to enter the field. In support of this argument, the survey reveals that people working in the field for more than 15 years are less likely to have a postgraduate qualification in technical communication—six of the nine respondents with more than 15 years’ experience did not have formal technical communication qualifications.

Among Irish technical communicators, those who had specialized academic qualifications generally
considered them to be useful but not always essential, managers suggested that academic training enables workers to be more effective more quickly, and individuals without academic qualifications had mixed views on their importance. Participants were generally positive about the contributions that academia can make, and has made, to the field in Ireland. It is possible that this positive attitude may be influenced by my position as a technical communication instructor (and former teacher of some). Despite the existence of a graduate program, academic research about technical communication contexts in Ireland is limited, complicating endeavors to establish technical communication as a professional endeavor. Part of this study’s contribution is to embark on a research, as well as a professional and community, program that may help to elevate the status of technical communication in Ireland.

Findings in relation to on-the-job training suggest that most training programs for Irish technical communicators are onsite, and focus on software, soft skills, and new media tools. While onsite training courses are one of the explicit expressions of an organization’s commitment to lifelong learning, some practitioners believe them to be less effective than other modes of learning. Orr [37, p. 156] found from his field observations that technicians discount training, and believe that “the job is really learned through practice.” Moreover, those technicians involved in his study were reluctant to attend training courses that were not mandatory. This study’s participants, by contrast, had positive views of the training they had completed.

Both the survey results and interviews indicate that training courses are an essential symbolic support for practitioners. One interviewee (a manager) stated that writers who do not have academic qualifications in technical communication can be effective within a year or two at his corporation due to the amount of training and support they receive. While some of the training courses he described were mandatory for all technical communicators, “some of it is self-training, for career progression or whatever you want to do.” Experience is an informal mode of learning, as espoused by the community of practice model. A company owner I interviewed noted that the best qualification for being a technical writer “is to have been something else first. You’ve got some idea of how a business works or how the world works in some way. That’s what you’ll be writing about.”

Although few Irish participants referred to conferences or events as training opportunities, one interviewee considered attendance at conferences to be invaluable for updating her skills and pointing to trends and developments she needed to understand.

Value and Status: A central principle of professions is that the work they do is understood to be inherently valuable. Some technical communicators who participated in this study perceived their work to be undervalued and their status in organizations to be lower than the status of colleagues in “harder” disciplines such as engineering, a perception consonant with much of the literature. Because status depends, to a degree, on how work is perceived by management, several participants concluded that a public relations campaign is needed for the field, a conclusion that dovetails with Giammona’s [16] findings. Three interviewees suggested the need for technical communication to be “branded” more effectively to increase the visibility and perceived importance of the work.

Although the work of technical communicators is sometimes dismissed, I anticipated that interviewees and focus group participants would not question the inherent value a technical communicator adds to a product. It was surprising, therefore, to find both interviewees and focus group participants dubious about the relative value of some types of technical documents, and the work of some technical writers. For example, one interviewee told a story of how his company was once commissioned to write a manual describing how to build a system. The system, however, had already been built, and the manual was to be produced only to satisfy a regulatory requirement. He saw this kind of document production as a wasteful and unnecessary exercise. Another perspective noted by two interviewees is that technical communication is rarely as risky as endeavors such as systems design and, therefore, may merit neither equivalent financial remuneration nor equivalent respect.

This study’s findings further imply that writers need to take some responsibility for how their work is viewed, and participants were aware of a need to behave more strategically to market their work. The sense that technical communicators are responsible to some degree for how their work is received by other colleagues is also alluded to in the literature. Wilson [40, p. 84] argues that writers must...
get out of the cubicle and articulate themselves as invaluable to the function of the company, explaining that the company’s product is information, in that today the product is secondary to how people understand the product.

Bloch agrees that:

Technical communicators need to take the responsibility of proving their worth to others within organizations, being aware that others are often focused on the bottom line. [13, p. 322]

One interviewee explained why a lack of visibility is a concern for freelancers and small companies:

“If somebody has a need that’s appropriate for what we do, they don’t know what to call it. For a lot of our clients, the last place they would look [in the Yellow Pages] is technical writing.”

He saw increased competition in the sector as a potential solution:

“The more competition there is in a given niche, the more visible that niche becomes. If somebody wants a solicitor, they know it’s a solicitor they want.”

Further, because the field has a relatively low academic and occupational profile in Ireland, many secondary-school students selecting programs of study, undergraduates considering future areas of work, and graduates who might be suited to the role are unaware of its existence, as observed by one interviewee:

“We were given a list of job titles you could go into as an engineer, quality engineer, process engineer, and one of them was patent engineer, or patent writer. That’s different, but related. We were never told that technical writing was a field that engineers could go into.”

This lack of awareness among potential students and the general public indicates that the status and visibility of the field in Ireland is low. An important signifier of a profession is that it is readily identifiable to nonpractitioners.

Lack of career advancement opportunities is a further status issue that this study highlights. Wilson [40, p. 81], describing his own experiences as a technical writer, reported, “When I looked around one day and saw few older people doing what I did, I wondered about the long-term prospects of my chosen career.” Four interviewees agreed that career advancement is a concern. The quotes below exemplify the perceived issues:

“If you want to go into management there’s just the one manager and 30 odd people. It’s one of those jobs where you’re here for several years and then you become a senior information developer but you’re essentially doing the same job.”

“The role and career opportunity growth is minimal, so from a long-term career perspective, it just doesn’t hold together.”

Career stagnation, as argued by Wilson [40], is both a cause and effect of the perceived low status of the technical writer’s role and the prevalent belief that the work is “routine production.” It is also a consequence of the recent economic recession, when fewer opportunities have been available in competing corporations.

Professional and Community Structures:

Professional symbolic interactions—such as professional education, membership in and contributions to professional societies, conversations with exemplars in the field, and attendance at professional meetings and conferences—increase social and professional identity. I sought to examine attitudes toward and involvement in professional organizations among Irish technical communicators.

Presently, there is no national organization for technical communication in Ireland. Survey findings indicated that Irish technical communicators are unlikely to belong to any professional organization (with participants citing reasons such as expense and lack of relevance to the Irish context). More than 77% did not belong to any professional society. Those who were members were most likely to be affiliated with the Society for Technical Communication (STC) (almost 15%), or the (British) Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) (7.4%).

Interviews and focus group discussions reveal additional reasons for lack of involvement. One reason among technical communicators working in large organizations was that they consider the internal corporate community to be sufficient. Managers and company owners appeared nervous about the potential conflicts that might arise through participation in a professional organization. These quotes exemplify their concerns:

“I contribute to the development of the field, but not outside of [Company X]. [Company X] is a pretty tight ship.”
“Because [Company Y] is such a big company, it has its way of doing things, and to apply external practices is quite a challenge.”

Another interviewee who runs a technical communication service company stated that because his company competes for projects, participating in a professional organization might be counterproductive:

“We’re in a position now where we have to be careful. We’re not in any community because there’s nobody else doing exactly what we do. We’re trying to dig a niche and make ourselves fit. We’re still suspicious of anyone who tries to follow us in.”

He believed it could be problematic to discuss some topics openly:

“There’s a very limited number of topics that are of general interest to other tech writers. And the stuff that’s really interesting you can’t talk about. It’s commercially sensitive. There’s a lot of freelancers working in this business. You don’t want to talk about projects too much. You don’t want to talk about clients too much. You would be legally restricted in talking about pricing.”

Technology has altered how and with whom workers network. Within corporations, online technologies make virtual teamwork manageable. Both managers whom I interviewed referenced the importance of internal online communication in supporting tasks and teamwork, and especially virtual teamwork. Writers also made regular reference to the importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in facilitating their practice. One aim of this study was to analyze the ways in which features of symbolic interactionism and communities of practice manifest. One such manifestation is through virtual communities. Brown and Adler [41, p. 3] discuss “the profound impact of the Internet, an impact that has yet to be fully realized ... to support and expand the various aspects of social learning.” Social networking tools enable members with common interests to profile and discuss their work, and to access support. These forums become, in effect, a virtual community of practice for professional groups. Redish [42] agrees that technical communicators

need to learn to collaborate among ourselves .... Some of this [collaboration] occurs in our online communities and through individuals who belong to multiple communities.

While online networks facilitate communication, one interviewee reflected on their drawbacks, and the importance of interaction in face-to-face networks because of the leanness of communication online:

You can find out all you want about technical writing from the internet, but chatting with someone is good for sharing insights. Because we write and read a lot, having an informal chat, just a chat, is good.

For the technical communicators involved in this study, social networks are vital for sharing information, discussing topics, profiling work, finding out about job opportunities, and keeping abreast of current practice. Some respondents expressed an interest in forming a support community for Irish technical communicators, in the absence of any formal professional organization. One of the outcomes of the focus group discussions on professional contributions was the organization of a face-to-face meeting for anyone who wished to explore the possibilities of developing a community. Although I had not anticipated this outcome, nor initiated the meeting, I attended. Among the attendees were self-employed technical writers, lone writers, and one employee of a multinational corporation that hires a large team of technical communicators. The meeting resulted in the planning of online activities, including a series of Skype virtual meetings on topics that attendees had expressed interest in. In addition to these outcomes, group members continue to use online forums to explore ways of further developing a community.

**Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research**

This section reviews the key findings from this study and analyzes how they impact practice and future research. It presents conclusions, explains the study limitations, and includes sections outlining the study’s implications for practice, implications for research, and suggestions for further research.

**Conclusions** Through exploration of the practice, education, status, and professional interactions of Irish technical communicators, this paper contributes to the discourse on the field of technical communication, and reveals several intersections with the literature on the field. The next two sections discuss implications for practice and implications for theory and research.
Implications for Practice: The practice of technical communication in Ireland appears to have much in common with practice in other parts of the world where research has been conducted (notably North America). For example, participants recognize related symbols, work in similar types of fields, develop similar skills, and operate in comparable virtual and agile settings. Nevertheless, the status and recognition of the field appears to be lower in Ireland than in those countries. This lower status is evidenced by the limited interactions between practitioners and professional organizations, and indeed limited understanding of the value of such organizations. Some practitioners align themselves to their corporations rather than their discipline. A possible cause of this alignment is the relative immaturity of the discipline in Ireland. At a time when outsourcing and off-shoring are common practices, and technological changes have constant impact on organizations and practice, technical communicators in Ireland need supportive professional structures that enable them to enact successful and rewarding practice. Irish technical communicators face many of the challenges explored by other researchers, including:

- The threat of off-shoring and, more generally, the challenges of dealing with global work environments and technological developments
- The low visibility of the role and the way that it impacts the status of technical writers in the workplace

As the discipline matures in Ireland, practitioners need to pursue strategic goals to advance the field, to increase awareness and understanding among nonpractitioners, and to mentor new technical communicators. An active professional organization could help practitioners in Ireland to develop strategy and to brand the discipline more successfully, as exhorted by Giammona [16] for the field in general, and by participants in this study for technical communication in Ireland in particular. The academic community also has a responsibility to guide and support community-building initiatives.

Implications for Research and Theory: Themes emerge from these findings relating to the concepts of profession, symbolic interactions, and communities of practice. These themes include the diversity of roles and career paths; the impact of changing technologies; the relevance of certification, education, and training to the field; the value and status of the role; the importance of community, whether corporate or occupational; and the perceived challenges that face the field. The findings also indicate that the type of organization that technical communicators work for may affect their experiences and perspectives of the role.

The study’s theoretical orientation proposes that professionalization need not be the predominant lens through which to view the development of an occupational field, and argues that an interaction- and community-focused approach may be more inclusive. The study findings point to many indicators of symbolic interactionism and the formation of a community of practice, including shared repertoires, symbolic interactions with colleagues, mutual engagement, and a shared understanding of the requirements of the role.

Limitations The field of technical communication in Ireland is small, and the educational field consists of just one academic unit. Therefore, I knew many of the participants personally. My position as a former teacher may have affected their willingness to participate or to respond honestly to questions. Although I have striven to be objective and mindful in my analyses, to acknowledge reflexivity, and to use accepted techniques of qualitative data gathering and analysis, the foregoing discussion outlines my interpretations of the context and data.

One limitation of the online focus groups was the potential for gatekeepers, such as managers, to join, and "lurk," therefore potentially inhibiting the contributions of subordinate colleagues. I was not aware of hierarchies among members of the group. Further, because it was not possible to guarantee anonymity in those discussions, participants may have been reluctant to air their opinions.

Suggestions for Future Research Research is an important professionalizing activity, and new and emerging professions have developed active research programs to elevate their academic and consequent professional status. This is an exciting time for technical communication in Ireland because the findings from this study show that the research landscape is very broad. This study points to research avenues relating to community formation and development, the links between symbolic interactions and practice, and the potential for educational institutions to contribute to the field’s development. In addition, the methodological approach that this study has taken, combining theories of communities of practice and symbolic interactionism, might be applied...
successfully to further study of technical communication contexts.

The findings of this study show that while no professional organization for Irish technical communication exists, some participants understand the value of professional supports and are eager to be more involved in a community of practice. Future research could explore the development of community, including the development of online communities of practice for technical communication in Ireland and other countries.

The findings imply some barriers to the future professionalization of technical communication in Ireland, possibly due to disciplinary immaturity. Evidence of professionalizing activity is limited among Irish technical communicators. Writers who work in large teams appear to identify strongly with their corporations, and their professional contributions tend to be intraorganizational. While a nominal career path appears to exist, career stagnation is also a potential problem. Professionals expect access to a career path and foresee their future within their occupation. Future research could explore how disciplinary maturity and strategic direction can be progressed for technical communicators in Ireland and other countries.

REFERENCES


Yvonne Cleary is Program Director for the MA in Technical Communication and a Lecturer at the University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland. Her work has been published in the IEEE TRANSACTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION, Technical Communication, Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, and she has presented her research at conferences in Europe and the US. Her teaching and research interests include technical communication in Ireland, technical communication pedagogy, and virtual teams.
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