In fall 2016, my third semester at TTU, I suddenly started actively identifying with and digging into the scholarship of technical communication and rhetoric. Though I had done plenty of reading and thinking previously, I had finally read and thought enough that I held my own marked opinions. I was no longer just absorbing information. In Dr. Koerber’s health and medical rhetorics course that fall, we read a piece by Celeste Condit (2013) that includes this lovely passage:

To be an academic should not mean to find the narrowest possible community to credit or gain accreditation with. It should be to accept the mission of enhancing understanding, where understanding engages maximal possible breadth under the—necessarily and desirably vague—trajectory of improving the richness of life for human beings while protecting the natural world around us. (p. 4)

I realized that this perspective encapsulates what I value about both the academy in general and technical communication in particular. Though Condit is a speech communication scholar, her point about engaging breadth to continue on a productive trajectory speaks to the interdisciplinarity of technical communication as well. We solve problems through sustainable practices that further both our field and the fields we borrow from (Hawhee & Hartelius, 2009). We draw on theories of sociology and psychology while collaborating with engineers, for example, but remain grounded in rhetorical theory and practice.

In my time at TTU, I have begun to learn how to situate and conduct myself in ways that maximize my ability to perform sustainable, meaningful work in technical communication. I have learned both how to be an academic in the field of technical communication and how to be a technical communicator in academia. The following discussion illustrates how my projects and experiences, directly and indirectly resulting from the MATC program, have shaped my growth as a student and soon-to-be productive researcher. My time in the program has been directed by these six outcomes:

1) Students will be able to analyze and respond appropriately to rhetorical situations and key issues in the field, including the differing goals and agendas of audiences, organizations, and societies.
2) Students will be able to use a variety of appropriate communication technologies and media.
3) Students will be able to create effective and user-centered technical documentation justified with relevant theory.
4) Students will be able to demonstrate sensitivity to the ethical, professional, and cultural issues that face technical communicators.
5) Students will be able to demonstrate the capacity to enter the workforce in technical communication as advanced hires, OR to enter doctoral programs in rhetoric, technical communication, and related fields.

6) Students will be able to demonstrate a sense of professionalism and a commitment to the profession.

Each artifact included with this reflection aligns with one or more of these outcomes. Combined with my academic and industry experiences, my artifacts demonstrate my commitment to the profession of technical communication—from both an academic perspective and an engagement with industry practices that can serve as a foundation for later teaching. Before demonstrating this engagement, I will describe all four artifacts, including the context and content of each.

**Artifacts**

**Artifact 1** is my final paper for Field Methods of Research (ENGL 5389) in spring 2016. That paper, titled “‘I Like to Help People’: Articulations of Volunteer Motivations and Rhetorical Agency,” involved field research (interviews) and multiple rounds of revision—both of which I had never encountered in prior graduate or undergraduate coursework.

**Artifact 2** is my document design final portfolio for Document Design (ENGL 5375) in spring 2016. It showcases a semester of work: four major assignments (artifact redesigns, TCR recruitment ads, research poster, infographic) and seven smaller designs from provided prompts. Though it may seem too large to act as a single artifact, I consider the portfolio itself to be the most succinct evidence for the design skills I have learned in the past year and a half.

**Artifact 3** is my documentation project from Publications Management (ENGL 5387) in fall 2015. It was one of my first attempts at extensive XML, HTML, and CSS. The project required an interactive redesign of a short piece of documentation—in my case, the disaster plan from my previous job. The result is an online training module that also acts as a quick reference (via the table of contents).

“Artifact” 4 is my technical writing internship at National Instruments (NI) in Austin, TX in summer 2016. As a Technical Writing Intern, I wrote documentation for a release of NI’s flagship software, LabVIEW. Though the internship is obviously not a deliverable, was not affiliated with a particular course, and did not result in course credit, writing for an international company was an opportunity I would not have received without being enrolled in the MATC program—an opportunity I was able to secure as a result of my courses at TTU. Note that all of my work for NI was proprietary, so I am unable to provide concrete samples.

The remainder of this reflection will trace, outcome by outcome, how my artifacts serve as evidence for successful completion of the MATC. There is, of course, some overlap in how these artifacts demonstrate the outcomes; where necessary, I have inserted asides that speak to this overlap.
Outcome 1

**Students will be able to analyze and respond appropriately to rhetorical situations and key issues in the field, including the differing goals and agendas of audiences, organizations, and societies.**

Each of my artifacts resulted from specific rhetorical situations, of course, but those of my field methods paper, document design portfolio, and NI internship were the most complex and thus offered the most lasting learning experiences.

My field methods project, a study of food bank volunteer motivations, required me to analyze and respond to multiple rhetorical situations: face-to-face interviews and IMRAD writing. In interviewing, I especially learned the importance of careful self-presentation (Tracy, 2009). Recruitment for my interviews was affected by my intense introversion, and one interview was affected by too little preparation (which I was unaware of until the interview stalled). In writing IMRAD, I learned the traditional method of presenting research in a solidly academic form. Even though my paper is not as complete as I would have liked it to be, it demonstrates significant grappling with—and I think, mastery of—a new genre. Both aspects of the project also required careful analysis of organizational factors, including the food bank’s expectations and hierarchy. Between my own self-analysis and organizational navigation, the rhetorical situations that accompanied this paper offered diverse opportunities for rhetorical inquiry and response.

Creating the document design portfolio similarly required presenting specialized content in a new-to-me genre: though largely a culminating class project, the portfolio includes contextual information for readers/viewers outside the class as well. It includes no references to course texts or discussions and clearly indicates the purpose of each project. With less explanatory text and a different selection of artifacts, the course portfolio could become a professional portfolio; with theory added to each artifact’s narrative, it could function as a more academic- or pedagogy-oriented one. This diversity, once again, can be extended to multiple contexts.

Balancing multiple audiences was also a major part of my internship at NI. For the first time, I found myself in a traditional technical communication position that required attention to the goals of my team, NI, and the end users of the software. I had to navigate management structures, writing expectations, and even some turf wars (when I was asked to stop noting accessibility issues because they were outside the scope of our team, for example). I had to learn—and quickly—what values I was expected to prioritize in my work. Balancing these expectations was more difficult than I anticipated, not least because no one clearly communicated them. I frequently had to make decisions based on my limited theoretical or observational understanding. Doing so bolstered my theoretical understanding of technical communication practice and offered firsthand experience I can use in later teaching.
Outcome 2

Students will be able to use a variety of appropriate communication technologies and media.

Throughout my MATC coursework, I have learned specific technologies and technological literacy. The latter demonstrates my ability to not only use but choose appropriate technologies (Cargile Cook, 2002). My document design portfolio, XML project, and NI work best mark these experiences.

Technologies

I created all of my document design portfolio materials (including the portfolio itself) in Scribus, an open source Adobe InDesign–like program. Learning this specific tool offered an opportunity not only to improve my digital design skills but also to fully appreciate the affordances of higher-end versions of software. As a future technical communication instructor, I appreciate that I will be able to introduce students to both kinds of tools.

The technological underpinnings of my XML documentation project make it the artifact I am most proud of, though it may not be the most visually impressive. Behind its creation are theories of content management and information design (see aside in Outcome 3), as well as increased proficiency in XML, HTML, and CSS. Though both HTML and CSS determine how content is formatted and displayed, XML is a structural markup language that creates a custom information architecture (Goldberg, 2009) that can later be used to single source content—to create multiple output types from the same basic data. Completing this project required knowledge of creating XML documents and linking multiple XML documents through navigational buttons, the latter of which is a more complex task than it might seem. I used a programming-oriented text editor (Sublime Text) to write both the XML (which I learned specifically in class) and the HTML/CSS (which I picked up on my own). After completing this project, I am confident in my ability to teach such technologies and use them for my own digital work.

Technological Literacy

Using Scribus for serious design work was often frustrating but, like many frustrating experiences, eventually worthwhile. I learned general principles of design technologies, strategies for using less-than-functional software, and how I might teach students to navigate such difficulties. My experience with Scribus (and previous experiences with InDesign) also prepared me for success with Photoshop and Corel Draw (which, though unbelievably outdated, was my NI team's primary image manipulation software) last summer.

Working for NI required me to employ all of the technological theory and agility I learned in my courses the year before. Technical writers at NI work in two separate content management systems and compose in DITA (a highly structured version of XML) in a text editor. I had never used any of those technologies, but after having read extensively on content management and information design (see aside in Outcome 3), I was well prepared to excel in these new environments.
Outcome 3

Students will be able to create effective and user-centered technical documentation justified with relevant theory.

Though I did not take any courses in my MATC that emphasized traditional documentation, I did learn principles of effective and user-centered document/graphic design, as represented by my document design portfolio and the XML project—and implemented in my internship.

My document design portfolio embodies the application of many design principles I have learned in my MATC. Most broadly, I designed the entire portfolio on a modified grid layout to promote a clean, consistent reading experience (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008, p. 132). Though I had a lot of oddly sized content to fit into the page design, I did attempt in a couple of places to break the grid for emphasis and increased interest (p. 147). As for more general design principles, the portfolio and its artifacts represent careful consideration of the four most common principles: contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity (Williams, 2014). The dark blue is repeated in the border lines and callout arrows to create a sort of template for the reader. Additionally, the page titles are strongly (and alternately) aligned to further the template feel and to keep them out of the way of the designs themselves. These choices all demonstrate further attention to ease and consistency of reading/use, which I am confident I can apply in other contexts and teach to technical communication students.

My XML project, though primarily intended to demonstrate proficiency with markup languages, is also grounded in principles of user-centered document design. In fact, I chose to remediate the disaster plan because it was ineffective in its original form—yet another deliberate response to a specific rhetorical situation (Outcome 1). University library employees did not read the print version of the document, and it was not conducive to quick reference. This digital version resembles an online course with which employees would be more familiar (like a typical university certification course). It also allows quick navigation through the table of contents, uses bullets and clear headings for skimmability, and doesn’t rely on color alone as a differentiating element (to accommodate colorblind users; Horton & Quesenbery, 2013).

Writing for NI allowed me further opportunities to learn and implement user-centered document design. Though I had no impact on the formatting of my assigned content, I was responsible for converting old content to the newer, more streamlined style. At every stage of this process, I paid careful attention to the user persona for my specific product, only including information that would—as my manager often reminded us—“help users do their jobs well and go home at 5.” Even before I took User Experience Research (ENGL 5388), I was applying prior knowledge from my coursework to a non-academic technical communication context in a way that allowed me to focus on “the experience the product creates for people who use it in the real world” (Garrett, 2011, p. 6).

**Combining Outcomes 2 & 3:** In many contexts, creating user-centered documentation requires navigating content management systems and single sourcing—both technologies I engaged with significantly while creating my XML...
documentation project and at NI. At NI in particular, I had to harness the affordances of these technologies by practicing structured writing to ensure clean transitions, consistency, and clear language (Rockley, 2003). As most modern technical communication work is performed in content management environments (see, e.g., Andersen, 2014), these skills are important not only for industry but also for teaching and researching in technical communication.

Outcome 4

Students will be able to demonstrate sensitivity to the ethical, professional, and cultural issues that face technical communicators.

While ethical, professional, and cultural issues are unavoidable in considering different rhetorical situations, two of my artifacts result from more acute engagement with such issues: my field methods paper and my NI internship.

Ethical Awareness

Quality, reflexive field research requires consideration of the ethical concerns inherent in dealing equitably and kindly with research participants (Sullivan & Porter, 1997). Handling those concerns well is a major concern for any field, but absolutely for technical communication, which is constantly oriented toward users. This excerpt from the methodology section of my paper best demonstrates the approach I privileged in my research:

To foreground the participants’ stories, I combined semi-structured qualitative interviews with storytelling methodologies, which emphasize the narratives of participants’ experiences as well as the co-created problems and narratives of the research site(s) and question(s) at hand (Davis, 2011; Jones & Walton, forthcoming; Legg, 2014). This approach views participants as people rather than subjects, as full co-creators of knowledge and truth.

(Artifact 1, p. 9)

Here and elsewhere, I practiced transparency in my write-up, acknowledging my limitations and what effects my choices and identity as a researcher had on the kind of data I could collect (Tracy, 2009, p. 12). I am confident that, whether with field methods or otherwise, I am well equipped to approach research from an ethically and culturally sensitive position.

Combining Outcomes 3 & 4: Ethically, user-centered design should also be accessible design (see, e.g., Youngblood, 2012); however, I am just now taking Web Accessibility (ENGL 5386). Had I done so earlier, I would have been applied accessible design principles to my work. For example, the color contrast of the XML project and several of my document design portfolio artifacts does not completely meet the requirements of WCAG 2.0 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0)—the current foundational web accessibility standards created by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Halfway through the course, I already feel confident that I could implement and teach accessibility in various technical communication contexts.
Professional and Cultural Awareness

Working for NI provided mostly professional experience, as I was exposed to the expectations of a large technology company with a dedicated technical communication division. I found myself in the middle of the definitional uncertainty I have so often read about in the scholarship of the field. Designers, developers, writers, user experience specialists, and localization teams vied for control of each project, despite seemingly clear boundaries in job descriptions. As noted under Outcome 1, I ended up in the middle of a turf war over accessibility, despite my best efforts to perform only my assigned duties.

I also encountered some cultural differences, though as the developer on one of my projects was based in Bangalore, India. We had a narrow window of synchronous communication each day, but most problems had to be solved in 12-hour rotations due to the time difference. We also navigated a number of misunderstandings that, I later learned, resulted from different management structures between the US and Bangalore teams. Those differences were likely both nationally and organizationally intercultural, but regardless, my work with the Indian developer broadened my experiences in navigating cross-cultural interactions and caused me to question my assumptions of how different definitions of technical communication function in those contexts.

Outcome 5

Students will be able to demonstrate the capacity to enter the workforce in technical communication as advanced hires, OR to enter doctoral programs in rhetoric, technical communication, and related fields.

My field methods paper is the artifact that most traditionally demonstrates my capacity to enter a doctoral program in technical communication and rhetoric—which I will do in fall 2017. Further evidence of this outcome has come largely from experiences that are not necessarily visible in my artifacts—not least through conferences and, most recently, writing for publication.

Artifact-Based Evidence

As noted under Outcome 4, my field methods project required an intense consideration of my subjectivity as a researcher and continual evaluation of how to best conduct research—and what “best” even means (Sullivan & Porter, 1997). I planned the project with guidance from Dr. Moore and executed the project mostly on my own, something I had never before done but now feel confident I could and will do again. Performing this research and writing this paper opened up the black box of knowledge-seeking and -making that I was so eager to enter but understood so little about. I learned how to create and pursue a question and that research is, even at its best, inescapably messy. This paper was also the first that I submitted while still incomplete, thus marking my realization that seminar papers are not journal articles and that my goal as a graduate student is to try out ideas and approaches, not to immediately jump into publication-ready writing.
Experience-Based Evidence

In fall 2015, I applied to several conferences, including Computers and Writing. I was accepted to two of them but did not end up attending; even so, the application processes were themselves useful introductions to the inner workings of the academy. The following spring, I attended CCCC 2016, though I did not present at all. Doing so, even as a first-year MA student, showed me what scholars in the field are currently doing and how they represent themselves and their research. Attending sessions on a variety of topics (materiality, embodiment, revision strategies, social media, ethics, and intercultural communication) also helped me consider what I might want to research. In addition, Dr. Carter’s address at CCCC 2016 gave me a new perspective on how technical communication and technological development fit with modern directions of rhetoric and composition.

After watching from the sidelines for my first year, I opted to apply for conferences more aggressively in my second: this year I gave an individual presentation at ATTW, participated in CCCC RNF, was accepted to co-present a poster at SIGDOC (in August), co-authored an article currently under review with Communication Design Quarterly, and had another co-authored article proposal accepted to a later issue of CDQ. My confidence in submitting these proposals and engaging this openly in the largest public venues of the field of technical communication and rhetoric strongly demonstrates my readiness to begin my doctoral studies and eventually become a full-fledged member of the profession and field.

Combining Outcomes 1–5: Throughout this reflection I have noted when I see certain experiences and projects as useful for later teaching. It is precisely these close connections to pedagogy that make three design- and application-heavy artifacts appropriate for the portfolio of a PhD-bound MA student. A major part of readiness to enter academia, especially in technical communication and rhetoric, is the ability to impart knowledge and skills to undergraduates. Through creating a document design portfolio and an XML/HTML/CSS document redesign, and interning with NI, I have gathered expertise in practical areas of technical communication that will serve me well when I am responsible for modeling rather than mastering the skills and concepts represented in the MATC outcomes.

Outcome 6

Students will be able to demonstrate a sense of professionalism and a commitment to the profession.

This final outcome is evidenced by my entire experience in the MATC program. I hope the preceding discussions have made clear that I understand what technical communication entails as an academic field, how it is practiced in industry, and how I can contribute to it as a researcher and teacher. Rather than itemizing this outcome as I have the other five, I would like to use this space to draw together the claims I have made in this reflection.
I devoted the first year of my MATC to pushing toward a career in industry. My efforts at articulating and understanding my place in the field of technical communication were muddled at best and misguided at worst—all because of this insistence that I was going to leave academia for a so-called real job. My first semester, when I started reading scholarly articles and learning what it means to engage with a field for the first time, I did so with the belief that I would need that scholarship instrumentally, only enough to draw out practical applications or theories and move on. The next year, though, I realized that reading the scholarship of the field was actually going to show me what kind of practitioner and researcher I could and should be. It was then that I began to see how my place in technical communication would not be, as I had always assumed, in industry. I saw that, really, I am an academic.

One of the most recent articles in *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, in a special issue edited by Dr. Cargile Cook and Dr. Rickly, outlines four things doctoral students should be able to do in order to establish themselves as technical communication scholars:

(a) learn to spot and articulate research problems; (b) find their vocation... within technical communication; (c) identify the research methods that best suit their personalities; and (d) articulate a research identity and agenda... (Grant-Davie, Matheson, & Stephens, 2017, p. 153–154)

As I complete my MA and look toward my PhD, I am confident that I am prepared for all of these activities—even if I am not yet prepared to perform them to the standard of a full-fledged member of the field. I have gained numerous approaches to research; an understanding of my professional, ethical, and intercultural obligations; practical and technological skills; and a breadth of experience that defines me as a researcher, teacher, designer, writer, and above all, a technical communicator.
References


