The Technical Communicator as (Post-Postmodern) Discourse Worker

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Abstract
This article reexamines Henry's 2006 proposal for training technical communicators as "discourse workers," as a solution within a certain postmodern problematic, in which changing economic conditions in the late 1990s and early 2000s made workers vulnerable to exploitation, outsourcing, and layoffs. Henry used postmodern and critical theory to describe discourse as a medium of leverage for enabling workers to define new workplace agencies. Even though Henry's discourse worker is an appealing concept buttressed by solid theory, it did not become a widely implemented model for pedagogy or workplace practice. To reexamine Henry's concept, the authors exchange late 20th-century postmodern theory for the more recent articulation of "post-postmodern" theory proposed by Nealon and explore the implications of swapping out the postmodern puzzle piece for a post-postmodern puzzle piece in Henry's formulation of the discourse worker.

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> We need to position students as something such as "discourse workers," with all the attendant implications for curricula.... We need to foster in our students an aptitude for cultural criticism, grounded in skills at cultural analysis in real settings.
>
> –Henry (2006)

For several decades, technical communication scholarship has had an ongoing conversation about defining and redefining the role of the technical communicator in the workplace (e.g., Andersen, 2014; Clark & Andersen, 2005; Conklin, 2007; Giammona, 2004; Hart-Davidson, 2013), seeking to reinvent professional identities that would garner appropriate respect, map abilities to emerging tools, and engender useful agency. At the turn of the last century, part of this conversation was influenced by the zeitgeist of 1980s and 1990s postmodern theory and drew on postmodern and critical theory to define and redefine, not just workplace roles but some of our fundamental thinking about technical communication (e.g., Cooper, 1996; Dombrowski, 1995; Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Savage, 2004; T. Scott, 2006; Slack, 2003; Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993; Wilson, 2001).

Postmodern theory narrated shifts in the economic and cultural conditions of late capitalism with dread and anxiety and afforded scholars opportunities to map our profession onto a problematic set of workplace transitions and opportunities. Jameson (1991) was particularly influential in this conversation. But his text was first published three decades ago, so we would like to revisit the role of the professional technical communicator in the "post-postmodern" workplace of today. In doing so, we rethink Henry's "Writing Workplace Cultures" (2006), which is heavily influenced by postmodern theory and its response to changing economic conditions. The article calls for training technical communicators to be discourse workers who can conduct "cultural analysis in real settings" (p. 215).

In his formulation of the discourse worker, Henry (2006) used postmodern and critical theory to imagine new agencies for technical communicators under the economic conditions of the turn-of-the-century workplace. We update the theory that underpins Henry's formulation with Nealon's (2012) description of post-postmodern theory. While Nealon does not abandon all the preceding theory, he prefers a perspective that can help

us move from critique to action. By updating the theory behind Henry's argument, we seek to recapture the concept of discourse worker for use in current pedagogy and workplace practice.

Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012), titled to echo Jameson (1991), identifies parts of critical theory that can propel critical practice.[1] Borrowing a phrase from Kenneth Burke, Nealon advocated critical theory as professional ''equipment for living'' (p. 170). Much of postmodern theory wrung its hands over the collapsing together of economics and culture or the flagging of comforting historical metanarratives like capitalism, religion, democracy, and the nuclear family. Nealon, however, sought avenues to move from postmodern theory's ''hermeneutics of suspicion'' to a post-postmodern ''hermeneutics of situation'' (pp. 87–89). As we will explain, Nealon described postmodernism (especially as literary theory) as a practice of discerning hidden meaning and identifying cultural bad actors but not a practice well suited to acting on those hermeneutic activities. He stated that these deep hermeneutic practices have lost relevance because today meaning seldom hides from us; it is often unabashedly out in the open. Thus, one of the foci of post-postmodern theory is on honing critical skills in order to understand our situation and positionality in ways that open possibilities for action. In short, post-postmodern theory is a 21st-century reassessment of critical tools, tactics, and priorities for investing of energy.

First we examine how some technical communication scholars used cultural studies and postmodern theory[2] to offer archetypes for working technical communicators and those who train them. Next, we examine how some scholars went beyond redescribing roles to offer ways in which technical communicators could change workplace and larger societal discourses. We begin with Henry's discourse worker but also discuss Slack, Miller, and Doak's (1993) technical communicator as author and Salvo's (2006) postmodern expert. Then, drawing on Nealon (2012), Hart-Davidson (2013), and Andersen (2014), we theorize a post-postmodern discourse worker.

The Technical Communicator's Role in the Fast Capitalism of the 1990s

In this section, we will describe how postmodern theorists articulated social and economic changes as a qualitative shift in the nature of capitalism—a fast capitalism—and how this articulation of a new fast capitalism provided a backdrop for technical communication scholars to position technical communicators as particularly and potentially suited not only to thrive in a fast

capitalist economy but also to be the model for a critically agential employee.

Postmodern theory, defined generally as "the rejection of the singularity of meaning and the assertion of an indeterminate multiplicity of meanings" (Dombrowski, 1995, p. 165), was an academically popular mode of critiquing the social and economic changes that began in the late 1960s. Similarly, the decades to come were a rich period for the development and popularization of literary and critical theory (e.g., deconstruction, poststructuralism, feminist theory, cultural studies) that would help us understand the cultural and economic ruptures taking place. Postmodern theory also provided a compelling frame for some technical communication scholars during the 1990s and early 2000s who were concerned with the identity, economic outlook, conditions of the profession, and the appropriate pedagogy for future professionals.

Henry (2006) described the ways that the globalization of economies in the 1990s changed the role of workers. The features of what postmodern theorists called "new" or "fast capitalism" included decentered corporations, flattened hierarchical structures, and destabilized work processes (pp. 204–205). As the loyalties of corporations turned away from employees and toward stockholders, these organizations changed; they became leaner and more focused on flexibility and profits. Henry is heavily influenced by Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996), who described the *leanness* of new capitalism as corporations' paring down of processes in order to respond quickly and innovatively to customers' desires in the face of global competition; this paring down of processes meant reducing middle management and focusing on lower level, frontline workers, who themselves were asked to be different kinds of employees in the changing economy. Gee et al. argued that a fast capitalism economy

> requires workers now who can learn and adapt quickly, think for themselves, take responsibility, make decisions, and communicate what they need and know to leaders who coach, supply, and inspire them. Workers must now take responsibility, usually in teams, for whole and meaningful tasks, which they understand and seek to improve. Furthermore, they must interface with technical information (e.g., computers, telecommunications, robots). Gone then—except, again, in the backwaters of the old capitalism—are workers hired from the neck down and simply told what to do. (p. 19)

Henry (2006) pointed out that this empowerment of employees in the 1990s is a new kind of subjectivity for frontline workers, specifically for technical

communicators: "Workers in this new scenario find themselves obliged to work more and more hours (under the constraints of 'flexibility') and to retrain constantly" (p. 205). While new capitalism seemed to offer workers more flexibility and empowerment as decision makers in their work, the new corporate discourse that accompanied this role sought to change workers' identity to focus only on the good of the organization. As Gee et al. (1996) stated, "The worker's 'freedom' is fixed within the margins of the goals, ends, and vision set by the new capitalism and its theoreticians" (p. 65).

New capitalism's revision of its workers' identities is exemplified in a consultant's booklet (Pritchett, 1994). The manual's back cover claims that Pritchett and associates' handbooks and training programs are used by more than 25,000 organizations and close to 3,000,000 employees. This manual offers advice to employees in the "radically changing" work world to help them reconfigure their approach to their employment and their relationships to their employers. Table 1 shows selected chapter titles and examples of tough-love advice for workers.

Twenty years later, much of the advice matches well with our commonsense understanding of the post-postmodern workplace, but in 1994, the booklet is addressing transitional conditions, and some of the advice and language sounds callous. For example, the booklet asserts the interests of the organization to be identical with those of workers and gives agency to the market as the irresistible force that relieves employers of obligations while it creates new obligations for employees. Its chapters liken the changes in workplace relationships in the "information age" to the changes in computer power (pp. 24–25, 36–37, 40–41), as Moore's law would predict. Seemingly, employees were on an arc to inevitably become a different and more efficient type of worker so that capitalism could continue to progress.

The postmodern part of the "changing roles" conversation in technical communication scholarship reacted to descriptions from scholars such as Gee et al. (1996) and advocated new, more agile identities for workers. Technical communicators are almost always located at the nexus of data, language, and meaning, trafficking in expanding economies of information within organizations. Unfortunately, these potentially agile roles conflicted with a historical misunderstanding of technical communication as secretarial and menial. Scholars addressed this exigency with professional and pedagogical research that redefined roles, genres, and methods of preparing students for the workplace.

Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1996) and Wilson (2001), for example, each drew on the work of former Labor Secretary Reich's (1992) predictions

Table 1. Selected Suggestions for Employees.

Chapter No.: Title	Advice
2: Commit fully to your job	"Don't waste your energy resisting change, and don't kill precious time sitting on the fence. Either buy in, or be on your way, because that's the best for both you and your employer" (p. 6).
3: Speed up	"Accelerate in all aspects of your work, even if it means living with a few more ragged edges. Emphasize *action*. . . . Take no part whatsoever in resistance to change. If the organization decides to turn on a dime, follow it like a trailer" (pp. 10–11).
4: Accept ambiguity and uncertainty	"You need to respect the fact that the blur of ambiguity is actually in the best interest of your career. Perpetual change will be crucial if the organization is to survive in the years to come. This suggests that you should learn to create role clarity *for yourself*" (p. 14).
5: Behave like you are in business for yourself	"Your employer wants more than your body, more than just your arms and back and brain. Your employer wants you to act like an owner" (p. 18).
10: Manage your own morale	"If you put someone else in charge of your morale, you disempower yourself. If you wait around for higher management to heal your wounded spirit, you'll end up hurting longer than necessary" (p. 38).
13: Alter your expectations	"The marketplace is merciless, and it puts definite limits on how generous or protective an organization can be with its people. . . . Instead of relying on your 'rights,' take personal responsibility for your career" (p. 51).

Source. Adapted from Pritchett's (1994, pp. 6–51) *New Work Habits for a Radically Changing World.*

about the 21st-century workplace to propose new classroom approaches. Both focused on Reich's concept of the actualized "symbolic-analytic worker" to remap the necessary workplace skills and options for pedagogy. Both sought to provide forward-looking schemata that provided language for technical communicators to articulate their work into the new economy and their skills as valuable to employers.

Other researchers considered the implications of postmodernism's destabilization of truth narratives. Given that technical communication has historically been perceived as focusing on the clear communication of facts, scholars wondered what opportunities were presented by or what

the implications were from a move from big-T to little t-truths. Cooper (1996) proposed a postmodern perspective to rethink genres, such as operator manuals, moving away from modernist precision to a playful, shared responsibility for understanding between writers and users. Citing reorganized national economies, globalized sensitization to diversity, and technology growth that ''undermines illusions of rational control'' (p. 387), Cooper suggested that technical communicators must either abandon or reconceive their approaches to the workplace and communication (p. 388). Dombrowski (1995) argued for a postmodern and humanist view that connected technical communication with rhetorical, social constructionist, feminist, and ethical critiques of science. He maintained that by complicating technical communication's social and epistemological relationship to conveying data and truths, ''scholars, teachers, and practitioners are both empowered to perform social criticism and ethically burdened to do so'' (p. 182). The obligation to act ethically or address ethical issues is a recurring theme in this turn-of-the-century conversation.

T. Scott (2006) divided the work from this time period of mapping a postmodern worldview onto technical communication roles and pedagogy into two categories: the capitalist hope model, in which theoretically enlightened writers could influence late capitalism from the inside and make it more ethical and humane, and the adjustment and survival model, which prioritized economics over ethics, accepting the harsh conditions of late capitalism and teaching writers tactics to flexibly succeed on capitalism's evolving terms (p. 230). Noting that neither approach is satisfying, Scott advocated an alternate pedagogy that aligned our students less with the mind-set of capitalist managers than with civic responsibilities.

Postmodern and associated critical theory provided a multifaceted appeal for many technical communication scholars. These lenses aptly described the working conditions of technical communication professionals of the day and provided a satisfying framework for scholars to articulate suspicion of capitalism, power, and totalizing narratives. They predicted a future in which communication and symbol brokering would be key skills. They also provided an opportunity to rethink technical communication pedagogy to bridge from older instrumentalist pedagogies and professional agencies to newer, flexible ones that would be central to the functioning of organizations. But as T. Scott (2006) pointed out, our attempts to reimagine a role for technical communicators within the economy that postmodernism described were not perfect. We articulated professional agencies that were sometimes naive, cynical, or even callous. In the next section, we look at how some technical

communication scholars deployed cultural studies and postmodern theory to resituate the technical communicator as an arbiter and shaper of workplace discourse. While their work does not escape Scott's criticisms, they offer some building blocks for us to rejuvenate Henry's discourse worker.

The Technical Communicator and Discourse

This section looks at three articles that use postmodern and critical theory to reimagine and propose a technical communicator who could be more than a flexible worker, who could engage and alter the discourses of new capitalism. Primarily we discuss Henry's (2006) proposed discourse worker, but we mention similar propositions by Slack et al. (1993) and Salvo (2006). We suggest that Henry's article proposes a role description that can be usefully recuperated although all three articles represent a usage of postmodern and critical theory that is bound in critique and not action.

Henry (2006) cited Gee et al. (1996) as stating that late capitalism is a moment when workplace narratives are being revised, and he argued that technical communicators should be critically trained for this revision. If they are trained to understand subjectivity, agency, and discourse, Henry believed, workers can potentially contribute new workplace narratives that provide counter discourses to the late capitalist tough love that is evinced in the consultant's handbook we discussed. Workers could question whether good writing can take place with the constant threat of layoffs; they could also question whether technical writing that seeks foremost to maximize shareholder value is always the best or most ethical approach. He suggested autoethnography as an important skill or pedagogy for technical communicators to use in order to recognize the discourses that constitute their work conditions. Once these discourses are made visible, they become pliable and open to revision. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1979/ 1984, 1991) and Foucault's (1980) study, Gee et al. usefully defined discourse as

> composed of ways of talking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display or recognize a particular social identity.... The discourse creates social positions (or perspectives) from which people are "invited" ("summoned") to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe, and value in certain characteristic, historically recognizable ways, in combination with their own individual style and creativity. (p. 10)

The breadth of this definition provides affordances for the technical communicator, not just to be a producer (well adjusted to new capitalism) of

manuals but to be a worker who has answered the company's invitation to "act like an owner" by coconstructing organizational narratives to align with a cultural studies commitment to "translat[ing] critique into ethical civic action" (J. B. Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2006, p. 15).

If late capitalism was a moment of rediscursification, then Henry's (2006) proposed discourse worker would be well placed to rearticulate workplace identities through constitutive language, practices, behaviors, and beliefs. Yet Henry criticized the effects of cultural studies pedagogy in the humanities, stating that this postmodern critique "has been [a] relentless insistence on forming students as critical discursive consumers" who know how to think critically but have not been taught to produce discourse in the same vein (p. 215). He wanted to arm new technical communication graduates with more shrewd identities as discourse workers:

> We need to foster in our students an aptitude for cultural criticism, grounded in skills at cultural analysis in real settings. With this kind of knowledge and skill, students can perhaps begin to see the cultural analysis that they conduct in other courses as dovetailing directly with their roles in cultural production and reproduction in workplace settings and to seek with us a means to influence the policies of those settings. (p. 215)

Henry wanted 21st-century technical communicators to participate in actively producing and shaping workplace discourse, understanding that discourses "see language as the very material from which reality is formed" (p. 203). Conceptually, discourse provides a means for connecting the professional production role of technical communicators to their ideological and cultural aptitude, but we need to better understand how to enact workplace textual production and critique as the same project and activity.

To do so, we must sort out the specifics. First, how do employees apply critique to shape better workplace discourses? Second, how do we imagine workers participating in rarefied discourse production practices? At its core, cultural studies positions itself in opposition to power and authority structures and theorizes modes of resistance. So, realizing Henry's (2006) vision would involve making distrust and deconstruction of authority structures generative and productive within the employee–employer relationship. Foucault (1981) explained that discourse contains a "ponderous, formidable materiality" that is tightly controlled through institutional regulation of language practices (p. 52). For Foucault, discourses produced within institutional power relations form the truths to which societies adhere: "Each society has its regime of truth . . . that is, the types of discourse which it

accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements'' (p. 131). To realize Henry's vision in this respect, we would need to understand how to enact a discursive agency that is viable within institutional constraints. For technical communicators to have this responsibility in their organizations would be an enormous shift of perspective and status.

Fortuitously, as harsh as consultants like Pritchett (1994) might sound, in admonishing workers to take responsibility for their careers, such a management strategy opens a door for discursive participation—an opening that would allow us to move beyond scholarly projects for revising the roles and workplace perceptions of technical communicators. This opening would enable technical communicators to work critically inside and outside their production roles to rewrite not only their individual professional identities but also the ideological fabric of the entire organization. But to do so, they need to understand how institutions manage truth and power through discourse.

Henry's (2006) concept for technical communicators who are critically armed for discourse is similar in tone to Slack et al.'s (1993) articulation model of technical communication that responds to the familiar exigence of uncertain roles and job insecurity in the technical communication profession. They argued that technical communicators should move beyond their stifling roles as transmitters and translators of communication to consider the relations of power and language in their organizations. Thus, technical communicators would take on the role of authors who are ''theoretically situated in the process of articulating meaning just as prominently as the sender and the receiver'' (p. 31). They used Gramsci's (1995) articulation theory to explain how technical writers can link elements to construct and reconstruct meaning and identity within larger discourses:

> Meanings cannot be entities neatly wrapped up and transmitted from sender to receiver . . . . Like any identity, meaning . . . can be understood as an articulation that moves through ongoing processes of rearticulation. . . . [E]ach individual, each technology, each medium *contributes* in the ongoing process of articulating and rearticulating meaning. (p. 28)

First published in 1993, Slack et al.'s article serves largely to arm students and their instructors with a reconceptualization of the agency that technical communicators can and should inhabit in the workplace. But they admit two difficulties: We do not know how to use articulation theory as a foundation for pedagogy or work, and although these changes make theoretical sense,

they would not be easy.[3] Nonetheless, this approach does help us better understand how institutions manage truth and power through discourse.

In reconsidering Slack et al.'s (1993) article, Slack (2003) questioned the direction of this project to reimagine roles for technical communicators as authors: "I have come to doubt that the assertion of authorship in the workplace is either as possible, or even if successful, as effective as we seem to imply" (p. 194). She posited that the identities of technical communicators and technical communication itself are fragmented and impossible to stabilize, suggesting that focusing less on what technical communication "means" as an identity and more on "what it is possible to do with and to that identity" would be more productive (p. 196).

Salvo (2006) discussed the potential for critically informed technical communicators to shape technoculture:

> Bringing the powerful analytic and descriptive methodologies from cultural studies into technical communication and using them to inform the active, engaged, and productive elements of technological invention and design most specifically offers technical communicators an effective means for engaging political, social, and discursive implications of technoculture. (p. 221)

For Salvo, technical communication is not the sole beneficiary of this critical theory infusion. Cultural studies would gain an applied foundation to supersede critique and begin to propose policy, perhaps even engendering a "postindustrial labor policy" (p. 223). But by itself, Salvo recognized, cultural studies has generally been more effective in analysis and not action, "mapping discourses, institutions, and flows of power on a virtual map of culture" (p. 221). His goal is to redefine a hybridized technical communication such that "cultural studies is not an inert critical positioning of the technorhetorical gaze, but a mode of informing and sanctioning critical action" (p. 224). If we find ourselves asking, How do we make critical theory applicable in the workplace? perhaps Salvo's answer would be, Apply it.

Salvo discussed five books or articles that exemplify an emerging type of technical communicator as "postmodern expert" (i.e., Faber, 2002; Henry, 2000; Kaufer & Butler, 1996; Kynell-Hunt & Savage, 2003; Sauer, 2002). He particularly highlighted the promise of research in user-centered design, in which technical communicators are working "among humans, technologies, and . . . institutions" not just to increase efficiency, as postmodern institutions perpetually want, but also to increase "opportunities for human agency and engagement" (p. 225). But Salvo found that each of these

exemplars falls short of his ideal of actualized postmodern experts creating technocultural rhetoric. The term *actualize* in this article is used not as a technical term but rather to imply (a) a status of reality and not mere potential and (b) the psychological term *self-actualize* or to reach one's full potential. Instead, as in more recent examples of scholarship that show rhetors actualized as some form of postmodern expert (Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008; Bowdon, 2004; J. B. Scott, 2003), the scholar, rather than the worker in the workplace, is discussed and revealed as the postmodern expert.

In Salvo's (2006) conclusion, he described looking forward to future technical communication that puts cultural studies to good use by making a practical cultural impact:

> And so I am looking to technical and professional communication to develop a practical rhetoric that responds to the failures of ludic postmodern discourse, to try to offer, if not a "new and improved" claim to authority, then a postmodern authority that allows both critique and action, observation and participation, deconstruction alongside construction. (p. 235)

While this vision is hopeful, technical communication has not developed into a progressive, actualized technorhetorical critique that has spawned new, more democratic postindustrial labor policies. Nealon (2012) would argue that critical and postmodern theory are built for critique and contain internal logics and features that make them difficult to operationalize. So, Nealon offered a reimagining of critical theory that includes awareness of situation and positionality along with possibilities for action. In the next section, we discuss Nealon's proposed post-postmodern theory as a promising companion for an actualized technical communicator. He offered a different type of cultural theory that focuses more on critically informed situated action and less on deconstructing the aftershocks of economic and cultural ruptures of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Post-Postmodern Discourse Worker

Earlier we discussed the economic conditions for technical writers in the 1990s and the ways some technical communication scholars used postmodern theory to reimagine pedagogy and the profession. Then we looked at Henry's (2006) model for a discourse worker and identified building blocks needed to actualize that role. In this final section, we examine the ways in which Henry's discourse worker narrative is meaningful in the post-postmodern era.

The discourse worker did not become our field's dominant narrative for understanding the technical communicator. Our field shifted focus toward other theories. In an e-mail to us, J. Henry remarked that he had ''been a bit perplexed that the concept of 'discourse' that proved so fecund in the nineties sort of got dropped from a lot of ongoing scholarship when theories such as genre theory and activity theory gained ascendancy'' (personal communication, September 17, 2013). Theory and scholarship that eschew cultural perspectives, such as genre theory, activity theory, and more recently material rhetoric and actor-network scholarship, have become more popular in our professional literature. Although J. B. Scott, Longo, and Wills's (2006) *Critical Power Tools* provided valuable connections between cultural theory and technical communication pedagogy, practice, and research, nearly a decade later, the book increasingly feels baroque—the technological topics are dated and the articles address a world before social media and single-source publishing. Perhaps postmodern or critical theory also does not have the same relevance (or pack the same punch) in today's technical communication scholarship as it did in the late 1990s.

Proposing a post-postmodern perspective, Nealon (2012) pointed out that our world today is temporally and qualitatively distant from the economic and cultural ruptures that haunted late 20th-century scholars and that we must deal with the ways that capitalism has continued to accelerate (since it has not burned itself out, as those scholars had feared, hoped, or predicted). Nealon explained the difference between a postmodern and a post-postmodern perspective:

> I think it's fair to say that you take up a ''postmodern'' position if . . . rampant commodification remains, strictly speaking, a ''problem'' for your analysis (in other words, if commodification functions as a conclusion or end point of your analysis, as it does for Grossberg). Conversely, if rampant commodification functions as a more or less neutral beginning premise for your analysis of popular culture, your position is ''post-postmodern'': if the tongue-in-groove meshing of artistic and economic production is all you've ever known, the very thing we learned from folks like Jameson in the early '80s, why should it shock or discombobulate you three decades later? (pp. 62–63)

The idea that we could take the rampant commodification of fast, late, or just-in-time capitalism as a neutral beginning premise is provocative.

Although Nealon (2012) is not an apologist for capitalism, he noted that the students we now teach grew up never knowing a time before totalized commodification and that we would have to pull out black-and-white snap-shots or newsreel footage to show them that such a time existed. Nealon asserted that postmodernists were wrong (or have become wrong) to think that there is a place outside of capitalism from which to launch critique: "There is no outside . . . . [T]here is no 'place' outside power, capitalism, metaphysics, the social" (p. 174). He argued that "driving a Prius or eating local foods is not actually . . . resist[ing] capitalism in any meaningful way (insofar as it's just more consumption capitalism, all the way down)" (p. 96). So, given that we are entangled in capitalism in our current post-postmodern condition, we must consider commodification not as the end point of our work but as the starting point.

Nealon (2012) moved away from the parts of cultural studies and postmodern theory that he felt were mired in critique instead of action, describing the task of developing discourses for post-postmodern critique and work this way:

> So among the tasks of periodizing the present, a collective molecular project we might call post-postmodernism, is to construct a vocabulary to talk about the "new economies" (post-Fordism, globalization, the centrality of market economics, the new surveillance techniques of the war on terrorism, etc.) and their complex relations to cultural production in the present moment where capitalism seems nowhere near the point of its exhaustion. (p. 15)

Nealon (2012) elaborated the post-postmodern project of "constructing a vocabulary to talk about the 'new economies'" (p. 15) as a shift from the practice of reading to the practice of globalization (see Table 2). If the main problem of postmodernism was fragmentation, our response was a linguistic turn. We developed a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to read, disentangle, ferret out meaning, and identify cultural bad actors. Now we have become less interested in what something means than in what we can do with it—the focus of the critique shifts from hermeneutics and meaning to action. Slack (2003) also suggested that we shift the focus away from redefining the identity of technical communicators and the meaning of technical communication because "what matters is what those identities get you, what they allow you to do, what effects they have" (p. 200). She added that "ultimately, by focusing on what the body can do and what can be done to that body, we can redirect our focus toward the potentialities of what techcom can become" (p. 206).

Table 2. From Hermeneutics of Suspicion to Hermeneutics of Situation: A Summary of the Differences Between Postmodern and Post-Postmodern Problems and Practices.

Condition	Problem	Required Practices
Postmodern	Fragmentation	Reading: • A hermeneutics of suspicion • Hermeneutic disentanglement • Questioning of meaning
Post-postmodern	Intensification	Globalization: • A hermeneutics of situation • Manipulation and usage • Critical (joyful) engagement with contemporary biopolitical and economic life

Source. This content is largely derived from Chapter 7 of Nealon's (2012) *Post-Postmodernism*.

Nealon (2012) explained this transition from fragmentation to intensification in terms of Foucault's biopolitics:

> If you understand social power as working inexorably through institutional mediation, then language is a key methodological tool.... However, if mediation at privileged institutional sites has given way to direct access of various kinds (if your whole life, public and private, is the surface area of biopower rather than the discrete parts of your life that discipline worked on at one time), then language will also...be displaced as the primary grid of intelligibility. When power is at work literally and figuratively everywhere, on the surface of "life" itself, then the spaces of mediation (between the subject and the *socius*, the body and the state, science and literature, and so on) are no longer the privileged fields where the agon of social power and resistance is worked out in its most intense manner. (p. 149)

The biopolitical power of post-postmodern capitalism means that we are not just economic subjects in the workplace and at the bank. Remember that Gee et al.'s (1996) definition of discourse includes "acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display or recognize a particular social identity" (p. 10). So when Nealon called us to construct vocabularies for the new economy, those vocabularies will include actions, manipulations, and usages. We might find useful vocabularies in the genre, activity, material, and actor-network rhetorics that are prominent in today's scholarship.

What, then, did Nealon (2012) mean by "hermeneutics of situation," and how might it help us understand how technical communicators shape discourse where they work and beyond? As a critical response to entanglement, hermeneutics of situation echoes Gramsci's (1995) "war of position," which can be understood as an articulatory, rhetorical project (see Grossberg, 1992; Wilson, 2013). Gramsci abandoned Marx's enduringly rigid superstructure and class system to explore how all societal groups can engage in counter-hegemonic action to redefine the commonsense assumptions that constrain what is possible and sanctioned by the most dominant societal groups. A *war of position* "is the slow, hidden conflict, where forces seek to gain influence and power, . . . the struggle to gain decisive influence in society" (McHugh, 2013, para. 1). Gramsci likened the war of position to literal siege warfare in that it "is concentrated, difficult, and requires exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness" (p. 239).

Nealon's (2012) hermeneutics of situation is similarly an effort to understand the cultural landscape and react to it in a way that furthers revision of dominant discourses. If, as Nealon stated, critiques of the 1980s and 1990s addressed ruptures and anxieties of the 1960s and 1970s, it is no wonder that archetypes like the discourse worker were imaginable but not realizable at the turn of the century. Those critiques look backward and not forward. Nealon's post-postmodern theory and his suggested *hermeneutics of situation*, or an "active engaged praxis within existing conditions" (p. 111), provide a better framework to understand what discourse workers might look like today and how they might act to rewrite workplace discourses.

But Nealon's (2012) suggestion that critical theory and postmodern theory have lost their relevance or pertinence is not unique. Latour, for one, has addressed this topic in several works. His books *Pandora's Hope* (1999) and *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) address false distinctions between nature and culture that tear at the heart of any modernism that would predate postmodernism. Latour (2004) drew on Heidegger's writings about "things" to propose critique based less on "debunking" (what Nealon, 2012, called the hermeneutics of suspicion) than on protection and care (p. 232). He proposed a world of critique in which

> the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. (p. 246)

"Gathering" is discussed by Heidegger as "a thing's underlying substance [that] cannot be discerned from that which is gathered around a thing"

(Heidegger, 1971, cited in Howe, 1993, p. 95). For Latour (2004), these critical gathering places are arenas where people and things solve problems generatively, becoming more than "objects defined simply by their inputs and outputs and become again things, mediating, assembling, gathering" (p. 248).

More recently, material rhetoric scholars such as Rickert (2013) have extended Latour's ideas to explain these gatherings as rhetorical spaces in which things also contribute to discourse. Thematically, gatherings are similar to Nealon's (2012) generative post-postmodern hermeneutics of situation, and this space-generative problem solving and material discourse provide a model for how we might describe a post-postmodern workplace with affordances for revision.

Turning back to our discussion of technical communicators, we must also consider that what it meant to be a technical communicator in 1998 is much different from what it means today. We can look at Hart-Davidson's (2013) description of "the work patterns of technical communicators" for a broad understanding of the locales and discourses inhabited by current-day technical communicators as well as the tools and affordances available to these workers. These locales and discourses would be the "real settings" that mattered so much to Henry (2006) and the "existing conditions" that Nealon (2012) described.

Like Henry (2006), Hart-Davidson (2013) used case studies of working technical communicators to describe actual workplace conditions. Hart-Davidson identified three patterns of work: information design, user advocacy, and content and community management (p. 51). *Information design* encompasses composing across media, genre, audience, and platform (pp. 52–54); *user advocacy* involves responsively ensuring that information is usable, useful, and compelling for audiences, users, and customers (pp. 54–56); and *content and community management* entails organizational writing stewardship, which reflects a growing responsibility for technical communicators, given the prevalence of "single-source publishing, distributed production, and user-generated content" (p. 56). Hart-Davidson provided heuristics for technical communicators to execute job functions and solve common difficulties. But he also provided professional terminology and schema that allow technical communicators to articulate their value within the organization or to propose ways in which they can take on new roles and add value. The breadth of his description of workplace patterns is likely beyond what individual technical communicators will find themselves doing (or have the taste or aptitude to take on), yet its breadth functions usefully for the profession by showing the range of things technical communicators do.

Similarly, Andersen (2014) discussed how rhetorical work and technical communication are changing where organizations use content management systems. Her main premise was that the ways in which we describe or imagine content management as symbolic-analytic work or as some other enhanced role for technical communicators are overly ''idealistic and abstract'' (p. 123) and not as ''concrete and action-oriented'' (p. 124) as the discourse used by the content management industry. Her explanation of present-day rhetorical work in organizations that intensively use content management shows changes that are perhaps indicative of (or conducive to) the rewriting of workplace discourses. Her explanation of how companies strive for ''content convergence'' (p. 129) to ensure that customers access consistent product information from different departments might represent opportunities to rewrite corporate discourses. If such convergence means that marketing and documentation discourses become blurred, and maybe internal and external discourses become blurred, then those responsible for describing technical details might also become responsible for articulating organizational identities. Given that some companies are ''embracing users' participation in creating business-critical content'' (p. 130) through reviews, ratings, and peer-support wikis, even users seem to be gaining access to participate in composing or revising corporate discourse.

Additionally, Andersen (2014) stated, content management systems represent a move away from ''static whole documents that have long been the primary deliverable of technical communicators'' (p. 131). The information in these static deliverables is hard to manage because it is difficult to access and use in other contexts. One might argue that these static documents have also long been the primary way that organizations managed what Foucault (1981) described as ''ponderous, formidable materiality'' (p. 52)—the type of information we described previously as being tightly controlled through institutional regulation of language practices. The move away from institutionally bound documents whose linear narratives are reviewed, signed, and shelved toward modular information that is assembled for ad hoc purposes implies less institutional control of discourse. Logically, the responsibility for the writing, rewriting, composition, and recomposition of those discourses is more distributed.

In our earlier description of Henry's (2006) unrealized turn-of-the-century discourse worker, we were theorizing a critically aware technical communicator who seemed unlikely to be able to wrest control of organizational discourses from the employer. In these current-day grounded examples from Hart-Davidson (2013) and Andersen (2014), we see a description of tools that enable discourse workers to act in agential roles across

organizations, and we see moments when organizations may invite distributed and collaborative authoring of organizational discourses. What once seemed far-fetched may now be commonplace.

To actualize the idea of a post-postmodern discourse worker, then we need (a) a theoretical base whose critique is generative and not suspicious, (b) a set of skills that provide access to workplace discourse, and (c) a workplace whose interest in distributed efficiency coincides with a worker's interest in discourse authorship. Theorizing this convergence of factors involves understanding the ways in which economic and workplace conditions have changed since the genesis of traditional cultural studies and postmodern theory. Some of these changes come from corporate managers themselves inviting or admonishing employees to act like owners. These changes do not give workers carte blanche to rewrite discourse, but they authorize them to act within the set of available opportunities and constraints. Nealon (2012) compared the opportunities to shape discourse in the face of constraints with the restrictions and opportunities offered by recipes and musical scores:

> The recipe or musical score presents a set of provocations that must be modified—sped up or slowed down—in the process of "enacting" them at a specific time or place: even if you follow the recipe, the cake is never the same twice . . . . [D]ifference is always wrapped up and manifest in the complexities of social and contextual response. You don't get to write the recipe or the musical score, but nevertheless it doesn't simply control you. You have to respond to it, work with and around it, resist it at some points. (pp. 111–112)

This post-postmodern approach to operating within already structured discourses is more generative than the cultural or postmodern theory available to Henry at the turn of the century.

Conclusion

T. Scott (2006) unflatteringly described the actions of the postmodern technical communicator in adjustment and survival mode as "euphoric and self-satisfied nihilism," requiring "opportunism, cynicism, and fear" as well as "resignation, servitude, and eager acquiescence" (Paolo Virno cited in p. 238). These are not professional or pedagogical aims to which we should aspire. In our discussion of biopolitics, however, we identified as useful aspects of Gee et al.'s (1996) definition of discourse, namely, "acting,

interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display or recognize a particular social identity'' (p. 10). We have also noted Gramsci's (1995) definition of war of position as ''concentrated, difficult, and requir[ing] exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness'' (p. 239). In understanding how we can actualize Nealon's (2012) hermeneutics of situation to define our modern discourse worker, we want to move away from Scott's dire cynicism to the latter theories of action. What we need is a rhetorically meaningful concept that will allow us to theorize the post-postmodern discourse worker.

Such a concept comes from classical Greece—*mêtis*—understood as cunning intelligence; in Hellenic culture, *mêtis* means ''flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, cleverness, opportunism, and experience'' (Dolmage, 2009, p. 5). This concept is what we need to understand the possibilities of Nealon's (2012) hermeneutics of situation and its call for a ''critical (joyful) engagement with contemporary biopolitical and economic life'' (p. 154). De Certeau (2011) compared *mêtis* closely with his own concept of ''everyday tactics through its 'sleights of hand,' its cleverness and strategems, and through the spectrum of behaviors that it includes, from know-how to trickiness'' (p. 81). Additionally, De Certeau argued that *mêtis*, as it is related in Hellenic stories, contains three characteristics: a sense of *kairos*, emerging as a ''temporal practice'' at the right time, a changing identity of ''many different masks and metaphors,'' and a tendency to ''disappear into its own action . . . having no image of itself'' (p. 82). In other words, *mêtis* is a tacit, nonlinear form of knowledge that appears as needed to help solve a problem when no ready solution is at hand and creative, or even devious, thinking is needed.

In her analysis of writing as a discursive technology for women in the workplace, Brady (2003) used *mêtis* to analyze the actions of two female professional communicators in large companies that produce technical products (p. 222). Brady examined how each worker purposely enacted *mêtis* (although neither participant was familiar with that specific concept) throughout her encounters with subject-matter experts and supervisors in order to enhance her credibility and effectiveness in their minds and improve the writing of the organization for its users. Brady explained how one participant, Billie, used the *mêtistic* strategy of subterfuge in talking with scientists in order to overcome their resistance to her role as an editor of their documents so that they would be more amenable to changing documents' content (p. 225). In some cases, Billie would take on a more humorous or a more serious tone or even ''play dumb'' with scientists when discussing content changes in their writing, depending on the scientist's

personality (p. 225). By doing so, Billie was consciously "constructing false identities" to convince the scientists who outrank her to agree to changes that she wanted in the text (p. 225).

Slack (2003) suggested some educational approaches that could facilitate skillful *mêtis* in this vein, warning that

> the identity of technical communication is simply too powerfully tied to corporate interest in (nothing but) transmission and translation. Efforts at resisting will be shaped and thwarted in the thousands of big and little ways that organizations have at their disposal. (p. 199)

Consequently, she advocated teaching students about the "process of hegemony" so that they could understand "the mechanisms that work to 'discipline' technical communicators" (p. 199). After describing technical communication as an assemblage, she demonstrated the mapping of two important flows in this assemblage and identified two imbalances that constrain the work of technical communication: the imbalanced position of technical communicators as negotiator between the expert (rich in cultural capital) and the user (p. 202) and the imbalance between the expert and technical communicators, in which technical communicators are always "'adjunct' to the work of the expert"—hired, fired, and dictated to by the expert and constantly having to justify their own worth (p. 203). To Slack, this position of negotiating imbalances suggested another pedagogical imperative:

> The lesson that is revealed for technical communicators by these lines of flight is, to my thinking, that technical communicators need, apart from the more obvious technical skills (basic writing and speaking skills for example) a finely tuned sense of what it means to negotiate the affective terrain within which their discipline is composed. (p. 205)

Slack's suggestions are the types of *mêtistic* strategies that we could build into realistic classroom discussions of managing relationships with managers and experts.

Mêtis is also associated with action in uncertain circumstances. Hawhee (2004) argued that *mêtis*, as a way of knowing, emerges from the body as well as the mind to help us make split-second movements and decisions (p. 47). Citing Detienne and Vernant, Hawhee stated that "*mêtis* is not an explicit set of precepts but rather a tacit style of movement running through most kinds of action, including thought" (p. 47). These nonlinguistic

descriptions of decision making and action taking are particularly apt if Nealon (2012) is right that language has lessened in value as a hermeneutic strategy in post-postmodernism. *Mêtis* as action that flows out of intuition or thinking might also be useful in constructing vocabularies that include actions, manipulations, and usages.

Johnson-Eilola (1998) related an experience he had playing a video game with his daughter. When he asked his daughter how she, as a millennial, a child of postmodernism, learned the rules of the game, she said that she learned the game simply through playing it. Her way of learning a video game becomes a metaphor for Johnson-Eilola's more difficult attempts at learning the game and learning to navigate the larger postmodern world. Adults who grew up in the modernist, linear era, in which structure and grand narratives still existed, had to confront postmodernism with its multiple subjectivities, technologies, and narratives that all seemed jumbled together right on the surface (p. 186). He explained that in learning, for example, a video game that has few instructions, "postmodernists [like his daughter] are capable of working such chaotic environments from within, moment by moment" (p. 195). For the generation of children who grew up at the turn of the millennium—Johnson-Eilola called them "surface dwellers" (p. 209)—this surface world is all they know:

> As we, the occupants of history, come to understand the possibilities of these environments [such as first-person action video games] we will also find that the next generation, surface dwellers, have learned to understand these environments in new ways and have things to teach us. (pp. 208–209)

The students we are teaching today (surface dwellers) may come to us predisposed to understand something like *mêtis* as a way to navigate the chaotic environments of biopolitics and rampant commodification. Our pedagogies will need to meet them where they are.

In this article, we have reexamined the concept of discourse worker that Henry (2000, 2001, 2006) proposed. We have suggested updating the postmodern theory with a more recently proposed post-postmodern theory to see if Henry's concept could be usefully recuperated and found that changes in workplace tools and relationships show potential for technical communicators to participate in broadly defined workplace discourses. We have argued that Nealon's (2012) hermeneutics of position describes an agency to both critique and act in response to an understanding of material conditions. We have offered *mêtis* as a frame for understanding this agency that may flow from nonlinguistic factors. And we have suggested that this post-

postmodern refiguring, or the discourse worker, may have significant compatibility with current rhetorical approaches that we might not necessarily associate with critical theory.

A post-postmodern discourse worker, then, can be usefully recuperated to help beginning workers understand their economic relationship to institutional and economic discourses and how they can shape those discourses. Likewise, this recuperated concept offers scholarly potential for bridging cultural and noncultural rhetorics that we study in the workplace.

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Notes

1. Nealon did not invent the term *post-postmodernism* (see Enos, Miller, & McCracken (2003, p. x; Hikins, 1995; Pepper, 2015; Pruchnic & Lacey, 2011), but we did not find any other discussions of post-postmodernism and the implied redescription of economic conditions as they relate to technical communication. Even though Nealon (2012) wrote from his perspective as a literary theorist, he directly addressed a set of changed and evolving economic and cultural conditions in the second decade of the 21st century, thereby providing a timely and provocative site-clearing, agenda-setting reconsideration of theory that helps us to understand the profession of technical communication today.
2. Because in English departments postmodern theory and cultural studies have overlapping interests in economics, culture, and the hermeneutic examination of how power structures create and reinforce meaning, we use the terms somewhat interchangeably in this article.
3. More has been written about articulation theory since 1993, but there is still little scholarship that applies these ideas in concrete ways.

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