

Mapping Out the Core Constructs of Social Justice as Heuristics in Selected Technical Communication Articles Using the 4Rs Model

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes social justice thematic directions in technical communication research using Walton et al.'s [7] 4Rs model to determine the field's conceptualization of justice.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → Data management systems; Information integration; Data cleaning.

KEYWORDS

Technical Communication, Research in technical communication, Social justice, 4Rs Model

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1 INTRODUCTION

Technical communication is a human-centered science that is still developing as scholars investigate crucial discussions like social sustainability and justice [1–4]. Walton, Moore, and Jones [7] developed the 4Rs model as social justice heuristics in their emphasis on the human-centeredness of technical communication and its focus on achieving social justice through its research designs and context [5, 6]. These 4 “Rs” stand for recognize, reject, reveal, and replace. This is used in this essay to examine the epistemological orientation and concern for justice of scholars in the field. The aim is to add to the disciplinary authority of technical communication by identifying social justice trends and guiding researchers toward current social issues that call for more scholarly involvement for a more just society.

2 METHODS

This study aims to identify scholarly trends in social justice discussions before and after the 4Rs model proposed in 2019 by Walton et al. The final twelve articles, six from before and six from after 2019, were selected from 301 search results from three renowned journals, including *Technical Communication Quarterly* (TCQ), *Journal*

of Technical Writing and Communication, and *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* (JBTC). The selection criteria included: a) Technical communication scholars who explicitly state that their research advances social justice scholarship; b) Articles whose titles or abstracts mention social justice or injustice; and c) Authors whose research is based on social justice-related subfields [8]. The 4Rs models were used as thematic mapping systems to deductively code the samples and discover trends. The articles that were published after 2019 were additionally inductively coded to establish more potential “Rs.” This was manually completed on an Excel spreadsheet and exported as a PDF file.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on findings for “social justice” in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, there were 151 research articles with publication dates between 1993 and 2023. While earlier articles advocated for justified social structures, the term was not explicitly mentioned. Similarly, in *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, which had 96 results for research articles published between 1971 and 2023, “social justice” was first explicitly cited in 2016. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* “social justice” search results included 54 research articles published between 1989 and 2022. The explicit use of “social justice” was first sighted in an article published in 2015. This establishes that technical communication, as a human-centered field, has been preoccupied with social issues since the 1970s, in the context of the journals analyzed in this paper. However, the social justice turn and the explicit usage of the term started gaining momentum from 2015 until today.

To establish technical communication scholars’ approaches to social justice research, I deductively coded six articles published across selected journals between 1994 and 2018. I argue that while the 4Rs model was theorized after these articles were published, scholars had always recognized social problems, revealed them, rejected oppressive structures, and proposed better approaches. The 4Rs model is, therefore, validated as a paradigmatic construct for social justice scholarship. Hence, in addition to being deductively coded, articles published in these journals after 2019 were also inductively coded for more possible “R” strategies: Reassess, Reframe, and Reform. These could be used in future analytical approaches by scholars of technical communication.

4 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Even though Walton et al. point out the injustices in the area and suggest the 4Rs as heuristics, some researchers in the field were already employing similar techniques. They also investigate other “Rs” (reassess, reframe, and reform), as this study establishes, to address societal challenges. Beyond the social justice branches described by NASW [8], the social justice components outlined in

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this study further emphasize the interdisciplinary and cutting-edge nature of technical communication and its cross-boundary research approaches.

This study highlights how crucial it is to comprehend technical communication patterns to promote social fairness. Future researchers will be able to map trends, evaluate more expansive data, and develop directionality and functionality in technical communication by using the "Rs" model, which is a suitable approach for social justice research.

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