Critical Collaboration

For the past 18 months, Dr. Carleigh Davis, Assistant Professor of Technical Communication, has been working with three co-authors on a manuscript for the upcoming IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication Special Issue on Enacting Social Justice in Technical and Professional Communication. In this article, titled "Embodying Public Feminisms: Collaborative Intersectional Models for Engagement," the four authors define an approach to social justice in technical communication called critical collaboration, which focuses on the connections between the embodied experiences of technical communicators (that is, the ways a technical communicator's physical and social identities affect their lives) and the work that they produce.

As part of this process, the authors refer to past research that challenges the idea that objectivity and neutrality are the measures of "good" technical communication. In fact, most existing research on objectivity and neutrality in technical communication shows that they are neither possible to achieve nor desirable traits in technical writing, as they flatten, reduce, or eliminate the experiences of the audience. In this new article, Dr. Davis and her co-authors argue instead that acknowledging different embodied experiences and using those differences to inform technical communication theory and practice allows more stakeholders to effectively engage with technical communication work.

Dr. Davis collaborated on this piece with Dr. Temptaous McKoy, an assistant professor at Bowie State University; Dr. Cecilia Shelton, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland; and Dr. Erin A. Frost, an associate professor at East Carolina University. The four authors met at East Carolina University (ECU), where three of them (Davis, McKoy, and Shelton) earned their PhDs and the fourth (Frost) was already employed as faculty.

All four have collaborated with each other, as well as other ECU graduates and faculty members, on multiple publications and conference presentations over the past several years. Collaborative work is challenging because it requires authors to negotiate schedules, writing styles, and ideas on top of the already intense rigor of academic research. At some universities, co-authored publications are also valued less than single-authored pieces, making them riskier to work on for junior faculty working towards promotion and tenure.

In spite of these challenges, these four authors are part of a network of technical communication researchers who see collaboration as central to the work of the field as well as their own learning experiences. "I have been privileged to work with a lot of really brilliant scholars, both during graduate school and since starting at Missouri S&T, but the network of scholars stemming from my graduate school cohort and advisors is very special to me," says Davis. "We're in different parts of the country now, but we're all still friends, and we still talk about our work and bounce ideas back and forth. We hold each other accountable, not just for doing the work and making space in our field, but for doing so ethically and responsibly. And that network of people keeps growing every year as new students graduate, so we get new collaborators to work with and new ideas to learn from."