# Teaching Pragmatics to Tech Com Students

In spring 2022, Dr. Eric Bryan taught a new course, TCH COM 5001 Pragmatics of Discourse, that combined the fields of linguistics and technical communication. A seasoned course designer, Bryan started from scratch with a topic he felt passionate about, transforming it into "palatable useful segments of information and experiences for the students."

Pragmatics is the study of language use in context, usually involving analysis of verbal exchanges. Linguists have long recognized that spoken or written words often do not match up with the communicator's intended meaning. An example would be a sarcastic remark. The meaning could be taken literally by someone for whom English is a second language or by someone on the autism spectrum – or by anyone else for that matter. Ideally, though, the audience for the remark would understand its intended meaning from the context of the verbal exchange.

As Bryan explained, "We all do pragmatics every single day. Every time we open our mouths, we're using a finely tuned instrument [our brain] that understands pragmatics very very well. It's so integrated into our use of language that it is very difficult to describe and articulate the mechanisms of pragmatics." He added that, in his experience, the only way students, or in fact other researchers, can understand these concepts is by experiencing them.

He said that the most challenging aspect of designing and teaching the new course was devising ways for the students to experience the concepts. "It's not like learning a language and teaching people a vocabulary and then they know the vocabulary and that's it. It's much more like teaching people the mechanisms for how they walk down the street or the physics behind jumping on a trampoline. If they can't draw a connection between a concept and the thing that they do every day, there's no hope they'll understand it."

Toward this end, he showed clips from a Harry Potter film and an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* as well as videos of people playing the dozens (a game frequently played in African and African American communities in which two contestants participate in insulting one another until one of them gives up) and children on the autism spectrum participating in a study of language understanding. These audiovisual examples offered opportunities for students to evaluate verbal and physical communication in relation to the communicator's intended meaning. The class also discussed written examples of pragmatics from historical and contemporary sources and read articles from scholarly journals in linguistics and technical communication.

For example, the students analyzed examples of pragmatics in Norse sagas and read Godwin Agboka's "Liberating Intercultural Technical Communication from 'Large Culture' Ideologies: Constructing Culture Discursively."

The final projects completed by both the undergraduate and graduate students were interest driven, and though both groups made the connection between pragmatics and technical communication, the graduate students produced projects that showed deeper understanding of the connection. Graduate students explored topics of cultural awareness, inclusivity, accessibility, and readability in relation to modern technical communication. Although the importance of pragmatics to technical communication has been well established in the published scholarship, Bryan

**Photo:** *Dr. Bryan working on his laptop in his office*

# Tech Com Miners Publish Articles in Peer-Reviewed Venues

Research is an important part of graduate studies, and publication is one way of sharing research with others. Our graduate students are active researchers while they are students, and some of the research they do is published, usually after they graduate. Several tech com miners published scholarly articles in peer-reviewed journals in 2021 and 2022.

Priyanka Ganguly (MS, TCH COM SP20) has published several articles since her graduation from Missouri S&T. Two of those articles began as chapters in her master thesis under the direction of Dr. Ed Malone. The first article, "Rhetorical Style Analysis of the Statement of Purpose (SP) Genre: A Shared Understanding of Lexis in Successful SPs," was published in *Xchanges* in August 2021, while the second article, "Review of the Statement of Purpose (SP) Genre: A Shared-Understanding of Rhetorical Appeals in Technical Communication SPs," was published in *English for Specific Purposes* in October 2022.

Ganguly is now a PhD student in rhetoric and writing at Virginia Tech. As a PhD student, she is the sole author of Tweeting Reproductive Justice (RJ) Advocacy through #AbortionMeraHaq, published in the *Proceedings of the 2021 SIGDOC Conference*. SIGDOC is a special interest group within the Association for Computing Machinery.
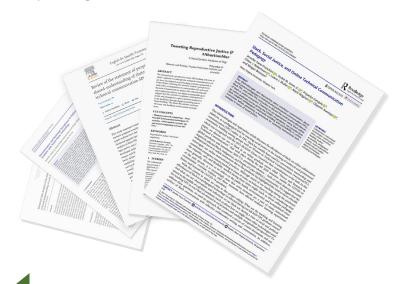
With Professor Jennifer Sano-Franchini and seven of her classmates at Virginia Tech, Ganguly published "Slack, Social Justice, and Online Technical Communication Pedagogy" in *Technical Communication Quarterly* in June 2022. This article explores the use of the workplace communication software Slack for pedagogical purposes in a social justice context.

Sumina Nasrin (MS, TCH COM SP20) and Mariter White (MS, TCH COM SP21) are co-authors of "Discontinuance and Restricted Acceptance to Reduce Worry after Unwanted Incidents with Smart Home Technology," published in the *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* in June 2022. Based on interviews with 10 users of smart home technology, the article examines the causes of and responses to user anxiety with a variety of smart home devices. Nasrin and White worked with ETC Professor David Wright and Psychology Professor Daniel Shank on this project.

Also collaborating with Wright and Shank, Charnise Anderson (MS, TCH COM FS22) and psychology alumnus Matthew Dew are co-authors of "The Usability of an Integrated Smart Home: A Usability Study of a Laboratory-Based Google Smart Home," currently under review at *Communication Design Quarterly*.

For a complete list of publications by our students and alumni, please visit https://english.mst.edu/research/studentresearch/

## Teaching Pragmatics

found it very encouraging that the students came to the same conclusion through their own projects.

He believes the course was successful and looks forward to teaching it again. "It was an incredible challenge. I loved it honestly. It was really fun to work with the students to make those connections to the content in the course."

*Dr. Bryan teaching class* ▼