SECTION III

Building Coalitions
At the heart of this book is the belief that technical communicators can and should build coalitions and that through intersectional, coalitional approaches to technical and professional communication (TPC), we can address issues of inequality and oppression. But we also believe that we need practical strategies and tactics for getting this work done. In this chapter, we offer four steps for redressing inequities in our daily work. These four steps—Recognize, Reveal, Reject, and Replace (the 4Rs)—provide a heuristic for action that extends from the theoretical foundation laid in Section II. Our action items for redressing inequities should include:

- Recognizing injustices, systems of oppression, and our own complicities in them
- Revealing these injustices, systemic oppressions, and complicities to others as a call-to-action and (organization/social/political) change
- Rejecting injustices, systemic oppressions, and opportunities to perpetuate them
- Replacing unjust and oppressive practices with intersectional, coalition-led practices

The bulk of this book has been about recognizing the injustices and oppressive systems embedded in our work as technical communicators, and this chapter extends that discussion into on-the-ground scenarios. But we ask for more than mere recognition. Mere recognition, much like surface-level representational diversity, is insufficient (see Chapter 7). These four actions may seem chronological: First, you do this and then, you do this. And that’s true: It’s impossible to reject and replace injustices if you can’t recognize them. (That’s why we’ve
spent so much time developing a language and framework for helping technical communicators recognize our complicities in injustice and oppression.) But the 4Rs will also attune you to the kind of coalitional work that is being done in the field, across the U.S., and around the world, where there are existing groups and individuals working to reject and replace unjust and oppressive behaviors. This framework, then, isn’t asking you to combat all forms of oppression alone; rather, we offer this also as a guide for joining other coalitions, building genuine allyships, and working toward sustainable practices of activism.

Throughout this chapter, we focus on turning technical communicators’ attention to the need for orienting social justice work through intersectional coalition building, a term that deserves a proper introduction. We are convinced by Black feminist, queer, and other marginalized scholars who already engage in coalitional work and assert, as they have for quite some time, that (1) our feminisms and activisms are ineffectual if they do not engage with oppression through an intersectional perspective, acknowledging that those who are multiply marginalized contend with different lived experiences of oppression that are not well served by handling oppression with a razor-like focus on one oppressive system (like sexism), and (2) our approach to activism and social transformation should engage with coalitional thinking: Working collectively to understand oppression and spur change. Here’s how these convictions guide our work:

- Any analysis of oppression and plan for change should consider intersecting systems of oppression, never satisfied with redressing injustices through a singular framework
- As we do the work of recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing, we should be guided by coalitions and collectives in the decisions we make about how to move forward, use language, and prioritize actions
- As a member of a coalition or as someone who is looking to join a coalition, we don’t always get to determine our own direction; instead, we look to those already engaged in a coalition or in the work of redressing inequities

This coalitional approach requires those who are not living at the intersections of oppression to approach change-making with humility; to listen more than they speak or lead; and to sometimes divest themselves of self-serving plans, ideas, and ways forward. In other words, the important thing about intersectional coalition building is that the right answer, the next step, is localized and should be driven by the collective agenda and the experiences of those who have been and continue to be multiply marginalized. Fundamentally, it is multiply marginalized groups that have demonstrated the need for coalitional action, and their voices and priorities should centrally inform those actions.

In this way, we address one of the central concerns we (and many others) have about a social justice orientation to TPC: Anyone can claim they’re working
toward their version of justice. We unapologetically demarcate ideological requirements for engaging in social justice, demanding first that the field develops intersectional understandings of oppression and second that it works toward building coalitions that acknowledge and address intersectional oppressions (see Chapter 7). We follow Chavez’ (2013) vision of coalitions as “less an existing thing or relationship…and more as a possibility for coming together within or to create a juncture that points toward…change” (p. 146). We assert that coalitional thinking and inclusive coalitions are necessary for change because they can shift and change quickly and because they engage difference and different goals without rejecting them. An intersectional coalition for TPC responds to oppression without prescription, assuming that the complexity of activism, power, and domination (as Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates and as Karma Chavez asserts below) is dynamic and shifting:

People’s lives are not comprised of singular identities or concerns…As queer women of color feminists have always shown us, oppression and privilege, power and identity, domination and liberation are experienced in people’s lives in vastly complicated ways. We need equally complicated understandings of how people who are committed to social change work to confront these material and symbolic conditions.

(Chavez, 2013, p. 149)

The 4Rs respond directly to the need for complex, inclusive, intersectional approaches to doing social justice in TPC. But, as technical communicators who like to get work done, we do not shy away from the need for a practical heuristic for thinking through organizational contexts. After all, one of the objectives of this book is to help TPC scholars and activists directly address issues of inequality and injustice in their daily work in organizations and corporations.

As discussed in Chapter 2, how we define justice matters for addressing inequality and injustice. We find Young’s (1990) faces of oppression useful as tools for breaking down the world around us and its matrix of domination (see Collins, 2002, pp. 277–288) because it moves from the theoretical to the lived. But theories of power, oppression, privilege, and positionality do not go far enough in helping technical communicators know what to do about injustice and oppression. We assert that, depending on their privilege and positionality, people have relatively more or less power to enact change once they’ve recognized the ways in which their programs or workplaces perpetuate injustices. As newly tenured professors, we are sensitive, for example, to the limits of what untenured and early-career faculty can say or do if they hope to keep their jobs. But we are also convinced that across TPC, more effort can and should be made to address inequities—many members of the field can be doing more with their power and privilege from their positions within organizations and situations. This is particularly true for het-cis white men and women, who in different ways
have been sitting on the sidelines and assuming a false sense of neutrality that is complicit in oppression and injustice. For some, perhaps this inaction is because those from privileged positions may struggle to recognize injustices and oppression when they occur (see Chapter 4), whereas multiply marginalized members of the TPC community are often questioned about whether or not they can know for sure that a microaggression is really a microaggression (even though their lived experience makes them experts at recognizing discriminatory and unjust practices). The first challenge, then, is ensuring that injustices are recognized and named as such. In the first two sections of this book, we’ve written a good deal about understanding oppression and injustice. Here, we get down to the nitty gritty: How do we recognize acts and practices of injustice and oppression, and what do we do about them?

A note to allies: Before moving on to the heuristic for action, it warrants a note that when (multiply) marginalized individuals with relatively less power or privilege say that injustice and oppression are occurring, those individuals should be trusted and listened to. Skepticism about stories of injustice may seem “balanced” or “fair” as a measure of objectivism, particularly in the face of bureaucracies—indeed, skepticism has been heralded as a prudent check and balance that ensures that, for example, Supreme Court Justice nominees don’t have their “lives ruined” by one (or three) victim’s claims. As discussed in Chapter 2, we want to move past conceptions of justice as fair or balanced and instead consider how our work might center the experience of multiply marginalized members (who, for the record, do not consider skepticism either fair or balanced). As such, we suggest that we cannot begin the work of shifting the field toward inclusion by doubting stories of microaggressions, institutional oppression, and procedural injustices. If colleagues or students from (multiply) marginalized positions present stories of injustices they have experienced, the response of an ally is to affirm and act appropriately. What does that kind of response look like? We suggest treating those stories like an improv actor treats narratives on stage (Poehler, 2014): Yes, and…

Yes, and...how are you feeling?
Yes, and...how can I help?
Yes, and...I agree with you: that’s not how we act.

If we want to be allies, we must all commit to learning more about injustices from those who experience injustices. Even those of us who experience our own forms of oppression can and should listen, learn, and engage with others whose experiences of injustice are different from our own. Which means your conversations cannot include the phrase: “Yes, but...” “But” doesn’t listen; “but” tells your listener they aren’t welcome; “but” is (often) a tool of oppression and/or microaggression; “but” erases experiences. And if no one is telling you about injustices, that (of course) doesn’t mean injustices aren’t happening. How, then,
do we recognize injustices? Begin, we suggest, by centering the experiences of multiply marginalized folks. What do we mean by centering?

Perhaps, as technical communicators, the easiest way to think about centering is to talk about users in UX design contexts. Take, for example, the design of a website. When we’re consulting with clients at the beginning of UX testing for a website, we often ask them about their users and/or intended users. If we’re working with a nonprofit that supports pet adoption, they’ll list users like families, moms, college kids. These users are at the center of the nonprofit’s world: They’re the people considered first in the development of the website. When, however, you’re talking through user considerations and then question whether the nonprofit wants to test for blind users, the clients are hesitant: “Do we…do we really need to do that? How expensive would that be?” This is an example of the people who live at the margins of this particular (and most) design project.

We know from disability studies scholars (Dolmage, 2008; Palmeri, 2006; Zdenek, 2015) that the world is designed for the able-bodied person. Ableism centers the experiences of able-bodied individuals, leaving those with disabilities at the margins. So, in design terms, we might ask, “Who is this space, place, program, technology designed for? And who simply must make do?” Dolmage (2008) critiques retrofitting, an approach to complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that adds design elements like a wheelchair ramp at the back of the building rather than including accessible elements in the building’s design from the beginning because retrofitting continues to marginalize those with disabilities rather than assuming their experiences and engagements should be accommodated and considered from the start. To design for those with disabilities is to center them, to ask, “How is this design decision affecting these particular users?”

When we ask you (or, all of us) to center the experiences of those who are marginalized, we want to make clear that both privilege and positionality can dictate who gets marginalized in the contexts of our programs, classrooms, communities, and workplaces. In faculty ranks of the academy, for example, non-tenure track faculty members experience marginalization in various ways: Their organizational status dictates their position on the margins. As we have discussed in previous chapters, others experience marginalization—and are quite often multiply marginalized—because of race, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, or class and any combination of the preceding list. In the context of multi-national and cross-cultural research, these considerations become even more complex, particularly when U.S.-based researchers are working with vulnerable populations in the Global South (see Chapter 7). In other words, our academic programs, research contexts, and other communities are filled with people whose experiences have been all but ignored because systems of oppression have dictated what Audre Lorde (1984) calls a mythical norm (see Chapter 4) and centered some experiences over others. As we begin the process of attuning ourselves to injustices, then, we would do well to consider the way the mythical norm has shaped the
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assumptions we make about the places we live and work. How might centering those whose bodies and experiences challenge the idea of the mythical norm shift or change your decisions, your practices, your assumptions?

Recognizing Unjust Practices, Behaviors, and Systems

The difficult part about the work of recognition is that marginalizing already marginalized groups of people might not appear to you (or to others) as an act of oppression. But as Moore (2017) writes, designing for inclusion challenges us to consider the ways the mundane work we do might be exclusionary and, in being exclusionary, contribute to systems of oppression. In transportation planning projects, the system goes something like this:

PUBLIC OFFICIAL (FRED): “We need to do public engagement to get federal funding to build this railroad in X spot.” [X spot often is through poor neighborhoods—after all, who would displace booming economic sites in a city?];
ENGINEER (PHRED): “Okay. Well, when should we do it?”
PUBLIC OFFICIAL: “I think we should do it soon, so how about in 3 weeks?”
ENGINEER: “Okay. My kids have softball practice at 6:30 pm on Thursdays, though, so we need it to be done by 5:00. So…let’s have a public meeting from 3:30–5:00?”
PUBLIC OFFICIAL: “Or can we just do it after the city council meeting on that Wednesday morning. We’ll all be there anyway because we have to give that presentation to the council. The meeting is scheduled for 9:00 am. Should be done by 10:15, so we can just do it at 10:30 am in the same room.”
ENGINEER: “Good plan.”
PUBLIC OFFICIAL: “Alright. Let’s be sure Lisa gets the meeting published on the website. And we’ll have her put some fliers up at the library and City Hall.”
ENGINEER: “K. Let me know when you want to work on the presentation.”

Is this unjust? Or oppressive? I am sure that the public official and engineer would say no. But are they contributing to systems of oppression? Seems likely. At the center of their decision-making is their own priorities: Ease, convenience, getting the project done on time, and so on. Citizens’ experiences, concerns, ease, and convenience are pushed to the margins: Can citizens make it to a 10:30 am meeting at the City Hall downtown to discuss a railroad displacing them to a new neighborhood? Only if they’re not working. And have daycare. And have transportation. And know about the meeting. So the meeting will be held, citizens from already privileged positions will come learn about the way a new railroad will bring in additional economic growth and cost relatively little once the federal funding kicks in. In the Environmental Impact Statement, Fred and Phred (the engineer and public official) will report having the full support
of citizens. By the time local community members (who were working during this meeting) hear about the project, Fred and Phred will be shocked (if not downright annoyed) at the resistance they receive, and even though they may sincerely care about the citizens’ concerns, they’ll already have the federal dollars, which can only be used for this very particular project in this particular location. And so members of the community will be bought out of their houses, using a range of tactics, and they will be forced to relocate.

This scenario (and scenarios like it) happens in cities all over the nation (see Moskowitz, 2017; Rothstein, 2017). Phred and Fred’s actions are perfectly defensible if we’re not working to center the experiences of marginalized citizens, valuing those most at the margins and considering their experiences before others. And Phred and Fred would likely be offended if we said, “You contribute to the oppression of citizens in your community.” But these small acts happen not only in transportation and urban planning but also in our academic programs, in our organizations, in our communities, and in our classrooms. Technical communicators make decisions every day that will either contribute to systems of oppression or resist and reject them; and, we argue, often technical communicators take the position of Phred and Fred: “I’m not contributing to sexism or racism or [fill in system of oppression].”

By centering the experiences of multiply marginalized individuals, we become better at recognizing how our daily, mundane practices contribute to the marginalization, exploitation, and powerlessness of others. In this scenario, if Fred and Phred had centered citizens from multiply marginalized positions, they would have made different choices. And this is why we offer the 4Rs: Recognizing how we might be contributing to systems of oppression is not enough; it doesn’t prepare us to shift our actions. Instead, it helps us see that the systems, organizations, and institutions where we work prioritize particular experiences and groups of people. When that prioritization gets built into our policies, procedures, and daily routines, those who are already marginalized struggle to be heard, valued, or treated fairly.

**Revealing Injustices and Oppression**

Revealing injustices and oppression to others is the next step toward addressing social justice in the field of TPC (and more generally), and it is difficult to articulate clear and straightforward strategies for revealing, since so much about how, when, and to whom we reveal unjust practices depends upon context and our own positionality. The more power and privilege you have in any given situation, the less risky your revelatory work will likely be. Take, for example, Greg. Greg has a PhD in Biomedical Engineering and is teaching a class on biometrics. In a classroom setting, Greg notices that his men students in a group consistently ask the lone woman student to do note-taking while they work on the assigned project. In this case, the teacher can often more easily discuss the
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microaggression and tie it to systems of injustice than the woman student can. The woman student’s position as a student makes it risky to raise concerns, but Greg’s ability to intervene is less risky. Our point here is that in this case Greg has relative power and privilege, as well as a responsibility to reveal injustice and oppression. After you’ve recognized an injustice or an oppressive behavior, your next question is strategic: What can I, given my positionality in this moment, organization, or institution, do to address this problem? In the classroom case, Greg has more direct agency in the moment and can stop to immediately address the problem, revealing the microaggression and moving on to reject it—and perhaps replace it.

It may seem like “revealing” is closely tied to “reporting,” but we shouldn’t confuse the two. Reporting injustices, hate crimes, Title IX violations, and other forms of injustices is really important. And sometimes, the most appropriate approach to revealing is to file an official report. But reporting is reactive and is often tied to institutional mechanisms that work against the victim. For example, at many universities, the Title IX reporting office is run by the same attorney who is responsible for defending the university against lawsuits tied to Title IX and are thus embedded in the matrix of domination at both the structural and disciplinary domains. In contrast, “revealing” explores a coalitional approach to exposing systems of oppression and acts of microaggression, injustice, or discrimination (among others).

Revealing an injustice is a call to action, an investment, and a coalitional move on either end (either in the revelatory act or in the act of hearing, recognizing and accepting). Revealing injustices (however big or small) is a call to action. Sometimes that action is to engage another person in recognizing how an injustice perpetuates oppression or how an organization is complicit in the oppression of particular groups or individuals. And sometimes that action is listening. Here, Indigenous storytelling scholars are instructive, in that they reveal that the act of telling is a doing, an assembling, an act of making (Sullivan & Legg, 2018); this makes even the act of hearing a revelation an active engagement. In addition, at times, revealing an injustice calls for an overt action in the world: A decision to make change together and to invest in rejecting and replacing the behavior, either on a personal, institutional, social, or political level. As a coalitional act, revealing an injustice invites the listener to strategize for change together rather than alone. As the hearer of a revelation, individuals are meant to choose: Are we in this together or not?

In the Phred and Fred scenario, Lisa, the technical communication consultant working on this project, may decide to tell Phred and Fred, “I can put this on the website, but I’m wondering if you’ve thought about members of the 12th Street community, many of whom will be affected by this but might not be able to make this meeting.” This move does not necessarily reveal the system of oppression at work here, but Lisa’s act of revealing surfaces the immediate problem: Excluding those most affected from the decision-making process, leaving
them at the margins of decisions, and making them subject to rather than participant in the kinds of world-making that powerfully shapes cities. If Phred and Fred are invested in inclusion and inclusivity, this may be a fairly simple move, which prompts them to say, “Oh! Thanks for bringing that to our attention. Do you have a suggestion?” Or “Can we do a survey of that neighborhood to find out what time works?”

But it still meets the requirements for public involvement, right?”
— “Well, if it’s important to them, they’ll make it. If not, that’s not our fault.”
— “We’ve already made the schedule and decision, Lisa. Just post the date and let us worry about the rest of it. You’re just the communications person.”

At this point, Lisa has some decisions to make. Does her revealing need more explanation? More depth? More attention? Does she need to include Phred and Fred’s bosses? Does she need to just go directly to, say, the 12th Street neighborhood herself and tell them about the project and why it’s important?

For the purposes of this introduction to the 4Rs, let’s assume, though, that Lisa gets affirmation from Fred and Phred: “Oh, no! What will we do!? We don’t want to exclude people from important justice-related decisions.” At this point, Lisa has both recognized the injustice and then revealed it to others.

**Rejecting Oppressive Behaviors and Structures**

But, of course, revealing is not enough if our objective is to build coalitions; we must also refuse to support the behaviors and structures that oppress groups of people and leave them at the margins. Revealing and rejecting can sometimes occur in dialogue: For example, Kristen reveals to Natasha an injustice or a microaggression, and in response Natasha shares in the rejection of that injustice. Because Natasha and Kristen are part of a coalition already, each rarely has to work to help the other recognize the ways microaggressions operate—but the act of rejection necessarily requires recognition.

What does rejection look like? In some cases, rejection is performative—an utterance. Kristen is often caught saying, “That’s not how we act.” This is, in many ways, a coalitional statement. If a student of color talks with one of us about unjust policies in our departments, we’ll often respond with, “Wait. That’s not how we act!” That kind of phrase signals a rejection of behavior. But we prefer a more active form of rejection, especially for those with relative power. For example, in an administrative situation where a colleague of color has been asked (yet again) to represent the department at a diversity luncheon or on a hiring committee, rejection is more than agreeing with the colleague that the practice is unfair. Rejecting it is also speaking up and saying, “Actually,
this won’t work,” and then offering a solution. What is difficult about rejection is that, like revealing, the rhetorical work shifts and changes depending on how power, privilege, and positionality operate in the particular situation. Sometimes, our relative powerlessness renders us capable only of acknowledging that we reject the behavior because we, too, are in a precarious, marginalized position. In other words, rejecting practices, behaviors, and injustices is a risk, especially for the multiply marginalized.

In the case of Phred and Fred, Lisa has begun the work of rejecting behavior that contributes to systemic oppression. When her engineering buddies agree to recognize the behavior as problematic, she can then go to work rejecting (and replacing) the behavior more overtly. In deciding that the timing of the public meeting is exclusionary, Phred, Fred, and Lisa have collectively rejected the decision and are ready to replace it with an alternative (if also imperfect) decision. We want to note here the cycle of the 4Rs and the way it can serve as a foundation for building allies and coalitions for change: Individuals can rarely reject, let alone replace, unjust practices alone, and recognition on one person’s part is often prompted by another’s revealing.

When one person (Lisa) recognizes an injustice, she then reveals it. That revelation then invites Phred and Fred to recognize an injustice. Once they, too, recognize it, the cycle begins again. Perhaps they are the sole decision-makers in this project and therefore need not reveal the problem Lisa has identified, but it’s likely that Phred and Fred will then need to communicate the problem to a larger team, if and when the rejection of their decision requires the team to work outside normal business hours, or to their families, when their rejection requires them to miss a family dinner or softball practice.

**Replacing Oppressive Behaviors and Structures**

The final act here is replacing oppressive behavior, structures, or decisions. In some domains of power, replacing is about personal change: “I’ve recognized this microaggressive behavior and so will not do it again. Instead, I will stay silent, affirm, and listen.” But the hard work of replacement—deciding what to do instead—often means

- shoring up additional resources
- challenging power relations or meaningful personal relationships
- restructuring organizations through new policies and procedures

In the Phred and Fred scenario, Lisa’s attention to the exclusion of the 12th Street community and their affirmative response means very little if not followed by a meaningful replacement that addresses the concern. For Lisa, Phred, and Fred, who at this point have rejected the behavior, the options are many, but the consequences could be high stakes. They might, for example, plan to
reschedule the meeting for another time, only to realize that there isn't actually a single time that works for all stakeholders. If they're working to center the experiences of those who are traditionally left out, they may decide to privilege the 12th Street community over other stakeholders. But this prioritization may require additional resources to:

- Learn more about the community’s needs and preferences
- Pay engineers overtime for working outside of standard business hours
- Rent a room in a location that’s nearer to that community

It’s important to note here that it’s possible that given the constraints of the project, these additional resources might not be available. Another strategy for replacement, then, would be to consider how to integrate these resources next time. This is imperfect. It still leaves the 12th Street community without an advocate, but looking toward the future allows for replacement to take on an organizational approach rather than a one-off change to the solution.

Building strategies for replacement requires a particular attention to coalitional thinking. Often, an individual can work to recognize, reveal, and reject an oppressive or unjust practice, behavior, or process. But, unless the sole context is an individual’s own behavior on an interpersonal or introspective level, replacement requires the consultation of others, the humbling of one’s own idea about what should happen and how a problem should be addressed in light of what others say. In this way, replacement is a building and a re-building activity that can—even if well intentioned—result in further exclusion or oppressive behavior if not planned collectively with intersectional thinking at the forefront.

**Applying the 4Rs: Technical Communication Case Studies**

We have briefly reviewed the 4Rs (recognize, reveal, reject, replace) as an introduction to practices for technical communicators invested in social justice, coalition building, and change. Now, we operationalize them more thoroughly in two cases that demonstrate how technical communicators can use them as a heuristic for decision-making and change. If Porter et al. (2000) are correct, that critique needs an action plan, then this is our action plan:

1. **Critical Context Analysis:** Seek to understand the levels at which the problem is functioning. This step helps technical communicators to recognize overdetermined oppressions and to pinpoint where they may be able to intervene.
2. **Coalitional Action:** Understand the technical communicator’s margin of maneuverability in regard to the 4Rs, that is, based on their privilege and positionality, how they can wield power to take action.
Scenario #1: Technical Communication Intern at a Nonprofit Organization

A nonprofit organization in the Global South offers financial services such as microloans to unbanked rural community members. The organization headquarters are in the national capital, but loan officers live and work in small villages throughout the country. The national leaders recognize the richest, most detailed knowledge that should drive organizational decision-making resides at the lowest levels of the organization (an inverted organizational hierarchy typical in humanitarian organizations). The national leaders regularly seek information about community members—their needs, priorities, strengths, and resources—from community loan officers. But most of this rich knowledge remains in the heads of loan officers, while their paperwork (which contains just a modicum of this information) is slow to make its way to the capital due to poor road conditions, isolated rural communities, and the expense of physical travel. Once paperwork does arrive, it’s not always useful for organizational decision making: Handwritten responses can be difficult to make out; forms are not always fully filled out; and it is labor intensive to compile information and seek patterns useful to inform decision making at the national level.

Despite these challenges, it becomes clear to the organization’s national leaders that community members are requesting additional services that align with the organization’s mission. But legal approval to offer expanded financial services requires a complex regulatory application and review process at the national government level, and part of this process will require more detailed information about community member needs and priorities. So the nonprofit leadership team at the national capital decides to digitize the current paper-based system. Their goal is to preserve what works about the current workflow while changing the medium to better allow the expertise and rich community knowledge of village-based loan officers to inform the major decisions the organization faces regarding expanded services.

The nonprofit organization raises money to purchase a computer for each village office and to hire developers to design a distributed computer-based system compatible with the constraints of the local infrastructure. The organization also brings on a technical communication graduate student from a U.S. university, Marcus, as a summer intern. As the developers begin backend work, Marcus is tasked with traveling the country to inform loan officers of the coming system, which could give them more input into what expanded services the organization should prepare to offer, as well as enable them to provide key information for the upcoming government application and review process. He is also asked to review the paper forms with loan officers and solicit their input regarding any changes that should be made to the digital version to make it easier to use and more appropriate for the loan officers’ work and the communities they serve.

Everything seems great until Marcus meets with loan officers at one of the first villages he visits. Midway through his explanation, Marcus is startled
when a loan officer stands up and starts yelling at him: This “great solution” would halve the number of people loan officers could help. Their clientele is poor; transportation is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Loan officers don’t meet with community members at the nonprofit’s local office (for heaven’s sake); they travel to people’s homes, which typically are also their place of business. The community members most in need of financial services are often the least mobile. If people have to physically visit the nonprofit offices to apply for microloans (or other services), those most in need will be least likely to apply. Alternatively, if loan officers continue meeting community members at their homes, the loan officers will have to write information by hand first and then travel to the office and type it into a computer, which could double their time spent recording information. They’ll do half the good they can now.

Now what?

Technical Communication Intern at a Nonprofit Organization: Critical Context Analysis

Before considering how the 4Rs (recognize, reveal, reject, replace) could guide Marcus in moving forward, let’s put this scenario in context (much as Marcus might do if he had read this book). Using Patricia Hill Collins’s (2002) matrix of domination (discussed at length in Chapter 5) as a framework, we become aware of various systems of oppression at work in specific ways. Importantly, as Collins (2002, p. 277) notes, the matrix of domination not only reveals how interlocking, mutually reinforcing domains of power serve to oppress but also how they can be used to facilitate empowerment. In other words, using this framework scaffolds an understanding of historicized contexts, norms, and constraints that may be flattened, conflated, or unaddressed altogether by more common frameworks of our practice (e.g., traditional usability approaches), and it also highlights points at which we technical communicators can take coalitional action within a particular situation. Situating our particular technical communication workplace within the matrix of domination and situating ourselves according to the 3Ps, we propose, can better equip technical communicators for coalitional action.

In reflecting upon Marcus’s workplace, the structural domain of power helps us identify the political and institutional forces that converge to create a need for the nonprofit organization’s financial services. Mainstream financial resources are withheld from many poor, rural community members in the Global South, creating a need for alternatives outside of mainstream banking, such as microloans and cooperatives. Also relevant to this scenario is the nonprofit organization’s location in the Global South, where colonialism only recently has shifted its form from outright governmental rule to indirect control through international institutions such as the United Nations and World Bank. Marcus might note that these international institutions are involved in regulating “development” organizations, including many of those which are locally led such as the organization
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where he’s interning. Additionally, these international institutions and the national government inform the regulatory application and review that his organization must undergo to offer financial services requested by marginalized rural community members. It is important to note that Marcus need not be able to change factors at this level of the matrix for an analysis to be relevant; analysis at the structural level reveals to him a historicized context directly affecting his work by setting in motion (and by constraining) the project he was hired to join.

Were Marcus to reflect upon the hegemonic level, he may recognize that private donors, primarily located in the Global North, also form matrices of domination relevant to his work environment. Based on models of charity (as discussed in Chapter 2), traditional donor relationships preserve power imbalances that allow donors to drive activities and priorities of nonprofit organizations by providing or withholding funding and by setting requirements and limitations on the use of that funding. Driven by “common sense” ideas such as holding nonprofit organizations accountable for using donations “efficiently,” this domination enforces cultural hegemony in the priorities, programs, and processes of many nonprofit organizations. This analysis allows Marcus to recognize that a face of oppression, cultural imperialism, is incorporated into the financial model of the nonprofit industry. A financial model that likely affects decisions about his project: For example, perhaps constraining the types of devices that project funding can be used to purchase.

Finally, the interpersonal domain of power is also at work in Marcus’s dilemma. Despite the shared nationality of community-level loan officers and the nonprofit’s leadership team in the capital city, and despite the inverted hierarchy of humanitarian organizational culture that at least partially informs day-to-day decisions and interactions, interpersonal domains of power threatened to render community loan officers powerless. Marcus now realizes that, faced with an information gap at the organization’s headquarters, the leadership team failed to recognize that village loan officers had expertise and knowledge vital to the early envisioning of potential solutions. This lack of recognition threatens oppressive outcomes: Loan officers may lose autonomy in their work tasks, as well as their ability to serve the most vulnerable, marginalized community members (ironically, a service at the heart of the organization’s mission). Without Collins’s matrix of domination as a framework to prompt reflection upon interpersonal domains of power, however, this oppression could be (and was!) overlooked by the stakeholders who weren’t threatened with powerlessness or marginalization, stakeholders including Marcus.

This multi-level analysis of relevant power domains is useful, but we suggest it should not fully comprise the “critical analysis” component of our action plan. In addition to using a framework such as Collins’s matrix of domination to reflect upon the broader context, we recommend that Marcus also use the 3Ps to situate himself within this context: What relevant privileges has he been accorded? What are some meanings of his identity markers within this context,
and how does that positionality affect his power to take action? Guided by the 3Ps, Marcus may note that he occupies a position of some privilege, in terms of nationality and education level. His national identity aligns with those in positions of power over the funding of the organization, though he does not directly represent donors. His specialized education affords some privilege, positioning him as a credible professional with relevant expertise, despite significant gaps in his knowledge and experience. However, his amount of power in the organization is relatively small. After all, he is an intern, which is not only a low-level role but also a temporary one. He concedes that he’s not positioned to directly enact or enforce organizational change, since he is not in a leadership role and will not even be associated with the organization when the summer ends. This brief analysis suggests some of the ways that the 3Ps can clarify for Marcus some resources he may be able mobilize, as well as some risks and constraints limiting his margin of maneuverability, in terms of the 4Rs.

**Technical Communication Intern at a Nonprofit Organization: Coalitional Action**

Returning to Marcus’s dilemma, we might suggest several possible paths forward for Marcus, informed by the analysis earlier. Here is one way he may choose to respond to the loan officer’s revelation:

Dismayed, embarrassed, and apologetic, Marcus thanks the loan officer and her counterparts, requesting more information about their process, their needs, and their recommendations. The next morning he contacts the national leadership and requests permission to cut short the village visits and head back to the capital to share some important news. Based on his conversations with the loan officers, it is clear that the computer-based system would be problematic as currently envisioned, but Marcus suspects that shared desktop computers would be cheaper to acquire and maintain than mobile technology such as smartphones or laptops, especially if the organization has to purchase one device per loan officer rather than one device per local office. He isn’t sure what kind of flexibility the donor funding will allow regarding device purchases, nor does he know how this news could affect the timeline for developing the new system (not to mention the regulatory application and review process). But the loan officers tell him that a digitized system of some kind seems promising, and they make several suggestions for streamlining digitized forms and ensuring appropriate answer choices. Marcus spends the long ride back to the capital working on a presentation for the leadership team that he hopes will convey the threats of the system as originally designed and will pose some potential, if partial, solutions based on input and recommendations from loan officers.
Let’s use the 4Rs break down what’s happening here. Until the loan officers reveal it to him, Marcus does not recognize the likelihood that the computer-based system would perpetuate oppression, nor even that the design process is exclusionary. (After all, when he joins the organization, he does not ask where or how the idea for the computer-based system arose.) However, when the loan officers reveal the oppressive potential of the new system—marginalizing those most in need of microloans by requiring applicants to travel to the local office—Marcus recognizes the truth they reveal to him. His positionality within the nonprofit organization does not allow him to reject or replace the computer-based system, but it does offer a margin of maneuverability to credibly reveal the system’s oppressive potential to those who may have that power. In other words, rather than dismissing the loan officers’ revelation or recognizing the oppressive potential but keeping silent, Marcus chooses to share unwelcome news and make recommendations unsought by those who hired him. He chooses to reveal the system’s oppressive potential to those who may have the power to reject and replace it.

This example makes clear the essential role of coalitions. Marcus is not even aware of the oppressive potential of the computer-based system without the perspectives of others, let alone able to suggest potential solutions. Similarly, the organization’s leaders cannot identify the most-appropriate, most-needed new financial services alone. They must draw upon the expertise of loan officers, who themselves are guided by local community members—especially those who are most vulnerable and most marginalized. Designing socially just solutions and engaging in socially just decision making requires a coalitional approach in which the perspectives of the most marginalized are centered.

This scenario also makes clear that we won’t always get it right, that the matrix of domination is powerful and insidious, at times perpetuated even by those committed to pursuing social justice. After all, the players in this scenario had good intentions, shared values, a socially just organizational mission, and an organizational culture conducive to supporting social justice. But they still came perilously close to designing and adopting a technology that would directly undermine their own organizational mission, hobble the autonomy of key employees, and threaten the access of the most marginalized community members to the financial services they sought. This danger brings home the importance of using the 4Rs as an intentional heuristic for action, supporting sustainable practices of activism.

What might that look like over the long term? Marcus could shift his own practice in several ways, moving forward. For example, when joining projects mid-stream, he can make a habit of seeking out the “before story”: How did this project originate? Who was involved in not just early envisioning of solutions but also in identifying and defining the problem? Who was left out of this early definitional and envisioning work? As he asks these questions, he would be attuned to seeking out the perspectives and contributions of those on the
margins. When joining pre-existing projects, Marcus may be especially attuned
to the matrix of domination, using this framework to examine aspects of context
(especially historicized aspects) that may not be apparent when structured by
different frameworks. When he works on projects from inception, he can intention-
ally and habitually engage in participatory and coalitional strategies, such as
seeking out a variety of types of knowledge to inform design and doing so from
the stage of defining and identifying problems, not waiting until the solution-
design stages. In his user research, he may look beyond the TPC discipline to
identify methods well suited to coalitional approaches: For example, positive
deviance and participatory action research. Other shifts could be more sub-
tle: For example, approaching the visits with village loan officers as primarily a
listening-and-learning task, rather than primarily a presenting-and-informing
task. As his career progresses, Marcus may seek opportunities to enculturate
the next generation of technical communicators to inclusive, participatory
practices, opportunities like teaching university courses as an adjunct Professor
of Practice from industry. In his courses, Marcus might draw upon participa-
tory models, using tools like the Value-Sensitive Design Envisioning Cards4 to
prompt students to think about long-term, indirect, and unintended effects or
outcomes of their designs. In these ways, Marcus could operationalize the 4Rs,
incorporating them into his professional practices—not to ensure that he never
again finds himself complicit in oppression. But rather to cultivate humility
and an openness to recognizing injustice, as well as coalitional, strategic employ-
ment of revealing, rejecting, and replacing unjust practices.

Scenario #2: Technical Communication Scholar in an
Academic Program

Let’s do it again: This time using a very different scenario to trace out critical
context analysis and coalitional action for technical communication work. A
junior scholar, who is a woman of color (let’s call her Julie), serves as the fac-
culty advisor for her university’s student chapter of the Society for Technical
Communication (STC). The student chapter STC frequently partners with the
university’s Access and Diversity Center, as well as the Black Student Union and
the Latinx Student Union, to provide TPC-relevant support such as designing
promotional materials for events. One of their longest-standing collaborations
is a blog that the STC developed several years ago, which provides a space for
students who are members of underrepresented groups to share experiences,
connect, and tell their stories. The blog has become a gathering place of sorts,
and all posting privileges by members must be approved by Julie. The blog is
now in its fourth year.

When the English Department (the TPC program’s home department)
changes web-hosting platforms, the director of the TPC program, George, ap-
proves the IT team to move over the blog’s hosting as well. (After all, it’s more
efficient to have all sites and services in one place.) In the process, George, a senior scholar who happens to sit on Julie’s promotion and tenure committee, also approves changes to the blog’s permission settings, removing restrictions for posting privileges on the blog. (The new platform is much more streamlined now, and setting up an approval process like the previous one is a bit tricky with this new platform.) These backend changes all occur unbeknownst to Julie until she reads a department-wide email announcement from the IT team about the new web hosting. When Julie contacts the IT team to ask whether the new hosting platform will affect the blog, they assure her that George, in his role as program director, has given them all the information they need. “No need to worry,” the IT team writes, “The blog has been moved over, and the transition was seamless. You’re welcome! If you need anything, just contact George; all changes need to go through him.” Julie wonders why she was left out of this process: Why didn’t the IT team contact her? She’s on record with the department as the blog’s faculty administrator. Why didn’t George defer to her, as the blog’s administrator and the student club’s adviser? Were these intentional slights? Does this reflect on the director’s perception of her abilities? With effort, she tries to shake it off.

However, when Julie goes in to check the blog, she notices that posting privileges are now wide open. Her STC students maintain the blog’s design, updating features and other tasks, but the junior scholar herself has administered posting privileges for several years now. She knows from direct experience how important it is to review and approve submissions and posting permission requests to protect the student community that gathers on this blog. Julie contacts her senior colleague to request changes to the permission settings, but George brushes off her request, explaining that this way is more streamlined and isn’t it more inclusive, too? Surely, she wouldn’t want to be exclusionary in a space that’s supposed to be about promoting diversity. Why does she feel the need to be a gatekeeper and control who gets to participate?

This scenario presents a differently complex set of relationships and problems. In this scenario, we might consider both George’s and Julie’s positionality.

_Technical Communication Scholar in an Academic Program: Critical Context Analysis_

Julie understands a few things about the context already: (1) That students of color are potentially at risk when their private space becomes public; (2) that she has a certain amount of power as their advisor and the blog administrator; and (3) that she has less institutional power than George and, of course, needs George’s support for tenure and promotion.

This scenario functions at several levels of domination, but the disciplinary domain is particularly notable. The academy structures power relations through its policies and procedures, particularly (for this scenario)
tenure-and-promotion procedures. Because Julie is an untenured faculty member, the power relationships between her and George are asymmetrical, with George having direct power over Julie. Because she is in her third year and the policy is that she can be released from her contract at the end of her third year, Julie is particularly aware of the power George has (as the director of the program) to affect her life. Although there is an Office of Institutional Diversity at her university, the office can do little in tenure-and-promotion cases—after all, who is the Office of Institutional Diversity to interfere with “purely scholastic” endeavors like tenure and promotion.

But, as the many authors in Presumed Incompetent (2012) report, women of color in the university are often met with skepticism, challenged when their white counterparts would not be, and subject to unwritten rules and expectations. For Julie, this means that the disciplinary domain wanders into the interpersonal in ways that are difficult to reveal to those who are not attuned to problems of exclusion and microaggression. Although George has always been collegial, Julie wonders if George has excluded her from the decision-making process because she is a woman of color.

When she considers her own privilege, positionality, and power, Julie is unsure what to do. She has very little institutional capital and, as a Black woman, worries about the ways her complaints might be read: She doesn’t have the privilege of being assumed competent, level-headed, and intellectually valuable. She is untenured, with only two other untenured faculty and 12 senior faculty, so she is not well positioned to change the culture of the program.

*Technical Communication Scholar in an Academic Program: Coalitional Action*

What is Julie’s margin of maneuverability? How should she proceed, given the context she’s working in? Here, the 4Rs (recognize, reveal, reject, replace) are instructive. Because she’s recognized the potential problem with the blog already, the next step is to reveal the problem to another person. Especially given her limited power in the situation, moving straight to rejecting the problem or replacing it could be a risk. Revealing is a coalitional activity, an act that seeks others who can or will work with her to address the problem, so when Julie attempts to reveal the problem to George (only to be rebuffed), a new contextual element emerges. Julie understands that George, effectively, is not an ally, much less a member willing to work coalitionally.

A note about Julie’s first reveal: Her first move was to reveal the problem (at least in part) to George. Given that George has taken official (or unofficial) control of the blog and STC chapter at large, this seems like a reasonable and safe move. Revealing the problem over George’s head (or even laterally) can be risky, given Julie’s position in the university. When Julie brings the problem to George, he has an opportunity to recognize the two potential problems or
injustices: (1) That he has inadvertently (after all none of this is intentional) ignored Julie’s authority in the institution, failing to include her in the decision-making and (2) that he has contributed to the institutional problems facing students of color and ignored the fact that their marginalization requires protected spaces, wherein their experiences are centered and valued. George—perhaps because he doesn’t understand the problem (and refuses to listen) or perhaps because he’s wrapped up in his assumptions about how improving efficiency and streamlining technology are valued/valuable—rebuff’s Julie’s concerns, demonstrating that he is unwilling to participate in coalition with Julie.

Given George’s response, Julie is back to the beginning. And now she’s worried that George might retaliate if she goes against his suggestions. What are her options?

1. Reveal to Someone Else: She can go above George’s head to the chair or the associate dean in the Office of Institutional Diversity
2. Reject and Replace the Technology: She can go to IT and have the technological processes shifted

Both of these are risky moves, so Julie begins the process by moving outside of her institutional context and revealing to coalitional allies who will understand her intersectional concerns. Revealing the problem to an external, uninvolved coalition allows Julie to strategize, to be reassured that she’s making the right decision, and to collectively develop an action plan.

In a meeting with coalitional allies, her colleagues ask a series of helpful questions:

“Why are you worried about George retaliating?”

It turns out, George has a rumored history of claiming to be pro-inclusivity and supportive of students and faculty of color but undercutting their efforts if they don’t align with his values.

“How are you feeling about the situation now that it’s a few days out?”

The sting of being left out of the process has worn off, but Julie is still worried about all the work the STC students and she have been doing to promote inclusivity and create a safe space for students of color to join the field of technical communication. The blog functions as sounding board with some personal concerns already posted: Worries about microaggressions, for example, and problems with understanding teachers’ expectations.

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“Do you know anyone in IT who might understand the problem the way you do?”

Julie has had coffee with Manny, a staff member who has been involved in Diversity Week with the STC, and though she doesn’t know him well,
she suspects he’d understand the problem. And, though he doesn’t have a lot of privilege or power, his position in the department gives him access to the technology. He could probably make the changes without anyone knowing.

The coalitional meeting helps Julie come up with a plan:

1. For now, ignore the situation with George, knowing that George can’t be depended on to address concerns about oppression, injustice, or inclusivity.
2. Reveal the problem to Manny and gauge whether he can recognize the problem too. If he does, then they can work together to replace and reject the public setting and permissions process that leaves students vulnerable to outsiders from the STC inclusivity initiative.

This scenario provides fodder for shifting practices in TPC in a number of ways. The first is that changes to technologies and procedures are not neutral, and considering those who are already marginalized helps us recognize the effects of technology in meaningful ways. Banks (2005) notes that mere access to technology is insufficient when we don’t consider the critical sociocultural aspects of technology deployment. In other words, in order for a technology to function as purposeful, usable, and useful with and within a community, technology access must be transformative. The technology must be relevant to the community’s social goals, needs, and wants and the community’s local and contextually unique affordances and constraints. Further, the technology must not reinforce or reify existing oppressions. As Noble (2018) reveals in *Algorithms of Oppression*, the very development of both front end and back end technologies constructs and reconstructs the world’s existing oppressive structures.

The second is that inclusive decision-making processes—assuming that Julie (in this case) has valuable knowledge in the situation and should be included—can help prevent these problems. This implies that TPC as a field should tend to its practices of knowledge legitimization, particularly by acknowledging, inviting, and accepting the different ways that knowledge is made (both experiential and disciplinary). Patricia Hill Collins, among others, provides a framework for rethinking epistemological frameworks and, as Moore (2018) suggests, this revised approach to knowledge making can augment our TPC practices. As such, this scenario suggests a need for expanding our knowledge bases and knowledge making through reading, citation, and listening practices. Who are we reading? Citing? And listening to? How are our patterns contributing to the marginalization, delegitimization, devaluation, or suppression of our colleagues who, like Julie, already work and live at the margins?

Finally, we want to note that coalitional and inclusive work is not all-access work. In this scenario, George adopts what he believes to be an inclusive approach, expanding the reach of the STC blog and including all students. But
this, as Julie knows, is a mistake. Although we do promote inclusivity, we want to be clear that not all spaces are for all people: Especially people who benefit from ableist, white supremacist and patriarchal systems that center particular experiences while marginalizing others. George Yancey, in describing “The Ugly Truth of Being a Black Professor in America,” articulates this particular point well. He writes,

I have often heard white people express the feeling of being somehow left out from black spaces, which are necessary for black sanity precisely because of white racism. It is as if white people are driven by a colonial desire to possess everything.

While we don’t suggest that George is intentionally asserting a colonial desire to possess everything, it’s easy to see how this colonial influence creeps into non-intersectional approaches to inclusivity. When Agboka (2013) and Haas (2012) talk about decolonizing the field of TPC, they mean not only with our research and teaching but also in institutional contexts like the one described here: Our technology use, decision-making procedures, and daily activities also require a decolonizing framework.

Conclusion

This chapter and these scenarios have proposed several strategies for how we can proceed as technical communicators in our work to redress inequities and address oppression. The scenarios and heuristics are imperfect but useful tools for structuring decision making in a way that is not merely ethical—but also just. As you move into the world (your programs, your offices, your classrooms), we know you will be met with resistance, skepticism, and sometimes hostility. We certainly have been. And we know this is a risk you take in order to move the world along a more inclusive, socially just trajectory. In anticipation of those experiences, we provide you with a final chapter that helps you address critiques and questions—combative and honest queries alike.

Notes

1 This is an uncomfortable claim but an important extension of the previous three chapters.
2 This is particularly true when Phred and Fred are instead Phran and Fran, women who consider themselves to be feminists. But hooks (among others) has already articulated the problems with feminism’s history; and we need only consider the U.S. presidential election of 2016, the Women’s March of 2017, or the election of Doug Jones* to understand that feminism often does not engage in intersectional, coalitional work and has long failed to center the experiences of the most vulnerable in the U.S. This also occurs with liberal progressives, for example, whose own self-identification can get in the way of listening and centering the positions of the
marginalized. While it seems we’re vilifying particular groups, we hope it’s clear that we’re calling in those (feminists, too) who seek to engage in just practices and asking us all to reconsider how we might be carrying out that work.

*During a special election in 2017, Doug Jones, a democrat, was elected to the Alabama State Senate. Jones ran against republican senator, Roy Moore. Moore, a former judge who previously served as a justice for the Alabama Supreme Court (and had been twice suspended from his position as justice) was accused of sexual misconduct during the election. In addition, Moore made racially insensitive remarks during his campaign, was alleged to have ties to white supremacist groups, was a vocal in his anti-gay stance, and has been noted as being opposed to allowing Muslims to serve on Congress. Despite this, Moore received 48.4% of the votes, with Jones winning the special election with 49.9% of the votes. Jones's victory is largely attributed to the votes of African American women. According to a Newsweek.com article (2017), it is estimated that 98% of Black women voted for Jones, while 63% of white women voted for Moore. Further, the article reports that only about 30% of white voters overall voted for Jones.

3 It’s important to remember (as we discuss in Chapters 3–5) that privilege and positionality work in tandem, which means that sometimes despite being in a position of authority in a classroom, as in this example, a person from marginalized positions may also face risks in revealing this kind of microaggression. They may be more likely, for example, to be read as an angry feminist or angry Black woman—and those comments may show up in their teaching evaluations or be reported to upper administration.

4 The Value-Sensitive Design Envisioning Cards were developed by the Value Sensitive Design Research Lab at the University of Washington; the purpose of the cards is to help designers better account for human values in their work.

References


