

# Social Equity and Intercultural Communication in the Workplace

## A Case-Based Technical and Professional Communication Assignment

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### Abstract

As questions of social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion have come into greater focus in the field of technical and professional communication (TPC), we have developed an assignment sequence in our TPC courses centered on these issues. This assignment sequence reframes our units on workplace communication and correspondence and asks students to practice a variety of genres in addressing and creating cases of intercultural miscommunication, insensitivity, and ignorance in the workplace. We have adopted a case study pedagogy for this assignment in an effort to preempt the resistance that can sometimes accompany discussions of social justice in courses where social justice is not traditionally addressed. We have found that this approach makes the instruction more authentic, provides students with realistic workplace situations in which to practice professional correspondence, and highlights the existence and reality of social issues in the contemporary workplace.

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### Introduction

In the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) there is a “social justice turn” taking place, “in which the focus of critical work expands beyond analysis to incorporate—even privilege—action” (Petersen & Walton, 2018, p. 417). This social justice turn is meeting a kairotic moment as varied questions of racism, privilege, and social inequity are being brought to the fore in more pervasive ways than this generation of college students has likely ever seen. Given these disciplinary and societal exigencies, we have developed a case-based writing assignment for our TPC courses that brings focus to questions of intercultural competence, social justice, and inclusivity. This assignment is an attempt to move beyond the common situation that Cecilia Shelton (2020) describes wherein “concepts like diversity pepper curricula...but students are enabled and in fact encouraged to skirt a critical engagement with the implications of difference among bodies” (p. 21). In this assignment, we have attempted to center, rather than skirt, such critical engagement with difference.<sup>1</sup>

This two-part assignment named “Social Equity and Intercultural Communication in the Workplace” was designed to accomplish two goals: 1) helping students learn to identify and address issues related to bias, social justice, and equity that commonly occur in workplace settings, and 2) providing students opportunities to practice composing a variety of common workplace genres.

It is an undeniable reality that our students, upon graduation, will be entering an increasingly diverse and multicultural workforce. In that context, they are likely to encounter subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination such as microaggressions and institutionally embraced power imbalances along cultural/racial lines. For all individuals, navigating diverse, multicultural workplaces has, as Maylath et al. (2013) point out, “inevitably made everyday challenges more

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complex and confusing” (p. 68). Complexity and confusion are often perceived as negative and undesirable; thus, by introducing this challenge in a classroom environment, we can explicitly frame the difficult work of navigating diverse, multicultural workplaces as a pathway to healthier and more equitable working environments. By focusing students on the reality of the modern workplace, we are allowing them to learn and practice strategies for identifying and productively working through cultural differences in a lower stakes classroom environment where they can identify their own biases, prejudices, and negative attitudes that could lead to tense, micro-aggression-laden exchanges in the workplace. They also learn strategies for addressing such situations in productive and community-building ways. In this way, the assignment we present focuses on inculcating in students intercultural competence, “the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively in international and cross-cultural technical communication situations based on one’s sensitivity, awareness, and skills” (Yu, 2012, p. 171).

Given the fraught, political nature of conversations surrounding culture, privilege, and social justice, as we bring discussions of these issues into the classroom, we have found it is almost inevitable that some students will say and write things that are objectionable at best. It is incumbent upon all teachers to identify and address such words and attitudes whenever we encounter them, but we have found that students often say, write, and perhaps believe these things more out of ignorance rather than malice. It is important to note here that we spend considerable time endeavoring to foster an atmosphere of professional empathy and goodwill in our TPC courses. We do this because we consider empathy to be the bedrock on which all communication—professional or otherwise—should be founded. By making empathy a conscientious focal point of our classroom environments, we find that when students say things that are harmful and offensive, we are able to directly address and correct them in ways that are directly in keeping with the pre-established ethos of the classroom. While we certainly can’t speak to the effectiveness of this strategy for all students, we find that this approach works well for both the offending students and any students who felt targeted. For the offending students, this tie back to a pre-existing classroom ethic of empathy allows us to address the issue without making the students a target, but instead positively framing their missteps as opportunities to learn and grow in empathy. For the historically minoritized students who may have felt targeted, this approach similarly avoids making them an indirect and helpless target that we, the authority figures, have to defend. In this way we attempt to engage in a mutually beneficial, growth-oriented corrective moment rather than in the rancorous shaming that all too often results in recalcitrance and contempt rather than introspection and community.

## Institutional Context

We collaboratively developed this assignment and then taught it at our respective institutions.<sup>2</sup> Both institutions are members of large state university systems predominantly composed of traditional college-aged, commuter students. The course context for Sam was an upper-division, 30-student “Professional Writing” course within the English major, though the course also fulfills a general education (GE) advanced writing requirement and thus draws students across majors and disciplines. The course context for Sherri was a “Business and Organizational Writing” GE course with an enrollment of 25 students, typically business majors.

## Case Studies and Genre Analysis in TPC Courses

We have found that in integrating issues of social justice, equity, inclusion, privilege, and cultural competence into our TPC courses, there is often student resistance similar to what Case and Cole (2013) found in their study of first-year seminars focused on privilege, oppression, and

diversity. Some of this resistance seems to occur because such content is not broadly perceived as being integral to the course. TPC courses are often organized around genre analysis and instruction (Luzón, 2005; Melonçon & Henschel, 2013), and while this is an appropriate and effective approach that we ourselves adopt, it can be easy with this approach to gloss over the social forces that shape genres, focusing instead on more concrete and easily identifiable textual matters. To address this situation, we have adopted a case study approach widespread in profession-oriented pedagogies such as MBA programs, clinical medicine, law, and others (Heitzmann, 2008). Case study pedagogy, “allows students to participate actively in the learning process” (Naumas & Naumas, 2011, p. 3) by asking them to engage with topics and problems drawn from realistic workplace situations. The concrete nature of case studies allows students to connect coursework with their future professional lives, enabling us to frame social justice issues as facts of workplace life. In doing this, we find ourselves following a similar path taken by Shelton (2020), as we have specifically developed cases that “[center] those on the bottom, on the margins, and at the periphery of the centers of power in business and industry contexts” (p. 21). Using this case study approach to frame instruction about professional correspondence and communication, students learn to recognize the multiplicity of cultural, identity-shaping factors that they must account for in even the most rote and seemingly mundane genres. Genre instruction in the classroom then becomes social action (Miller, 1984) that reflects the end goal of the social justice turn identified by Petersen and Walton (2018).

## Assignment Overview

This assignment takes place in two parts that can be and have been expanded or truncated as curricular goals and course calendars permit. The two parts are assigned and carried out in sequence, not simultaneously, so the discussions, readings, and work completed for Part 1 inform the work students complete for Part 2.

We typically teach this assignment a few weeks into the semester, once the students have had an opportunity to become more comfortable with one another. In the context of the semester wherein this assignment, as presented, was taught, students had just completed their first unit on resumes and cover letters, during which they engaged in significant peer review with many of their classmates. We thus had a fairly established community in place which allowed more thorough and honest discussions about identity, power, and discrimination.

The assignment sheet presented here was used by Sam during the Spring 2020 semester, but this version of the assignment largely reflects how this assignment has been carried out in other semesters.

In Part 1 of the assignment, students are presented with two cases wherein individuals in a workplace demonstrate a lack of intercultural awareness and empathy which has caused tensions to arise on the basis of culture, identity, and status. Students are asked to assume various workplace identities/roles to compose a series of professional correspondence genres addressing these cases.

In the first case, “Smelly Ethnic Foods,” a passive-aggressive note has been left on a break room microwave that uses insensitive, microaggression-laden language regarding a culturally marginalized co-worker’s choice of food and the smells it produces. The second case, “A Well-Meaning Miscommunication,” describes an instance of linguistic bias and cross-cultural miscommunication between an Eastern European employee and her North American female supervisor which takes place over several weeks. The two women navigate microaggressions, awkward personal interactions, and missed opportunities for seeking understanding.<sup>3</sup>

While we developed these two cases in Part 1 to specifically highlight intercultural communication concerns, similar cases might be developed that highlight intracultural or otherwise

intersectional concerns of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This part of the assignment might thus be adapted to highlight other aspects of identity, culture, or current events, by developing other cases, according to instructors' desires or areas of special interest, such as the following:

- A supervisor arranges to have a police officer come to the office to provide active-shooter training for their employees, including several BIPOC, in the aftermath of a police shooting.
- A group of women in an office throw a gender-reveal baby shower for a fellow female employee, but they fail to invite their gender non-conforming coworker for fear of offending them.
- A female-presenting person in a healthcare workplace is asked to wear their hair in a certain style that matches others in the workplace after concerns are raised about hygiene.

In addressing the two cases we have outlined in the project presented here, students are asked to complete two deliverables. The first is an employee complaint email composed from the perspective of either the employee who is suffering from headaches in case 1 or the Eastern European employee in case 2. The second deliverable is a memo from the supervisor in case 1 or the HR department in case 2 addressing the problems that have arisen and how the company is addressing them.

In Part 2 of the assignment, students are asked to compose their own evidence-informed narratives of workplace social justice concerns, with emphasis placed on the fact that good narratives do not have easy or obvious solutions. Because case studies are a common genre in TPC, we call these “case narratives” in our courses. Students then perform research to find public-facing sources of any kind, genre, and medium that address various aspects of the underlying social justice/equity concerns in the case narratives they have constructed. Students use these sources to create an annotated bibliography that could be used and distributed in a workplace setting as an early step in addressing the underlying concerns with environmental culture and the systemic inequalities that allowed the issues at the heart of the case to occur. The deliverables constructed in Part 2 also include an original company logo and branding.

At all stages of this project, from the first day we introduce it through peer review of the final deliverables, we engage in two kinds of scaffolding: 1) more traditional instruction, discussion and practice regarding the constraints and expectations of the various genres the students are producing, and 2) instruction, discussion and practice regarding understanding and navigating the nuances of diverse workplace environments. With regard to this second category of scaffolding, we devote considerable time and attention—through assigned readings (both academic and popular) and structured class discussions and activities—to helping students better understand a variety of important topics and ideas. These include the vagaries of “culture,” the existence and persistence of both overt and unconscious microaggressions, the structural inequities and power imbalances that invariably exist in nearly all organizations, the legal/ethical responsibilities of companies, and, perhaps most importantly, that “human beings are different from each other in various ways, and this does not translate into deficiency or deviance when they differ from a traditional norm” (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014).

As mentioned, we assign students readings of various kinds to support our instruction. Some of the more formal readings we have found particularly helpful to assign in framing these discussions and practices include excerpts from Yu and Savage's (2013) *Negotiating Cultural Encounters*, Jones and Walton's (2018) “Using Narratives to Foster Critical Thinking about Diversity and Social Justice,” Leydens' (2012) “What Does Professional Communication Research Have To Do With Social Justice? Intersections and Sources of Resistance,” Colton and Holmes' (2018) “A Social Justice Theory of Active Equality for Technical Communication,” and Agboka's (2014) “Decolonial

Methodologies: Social Justice Perspectives in Intercultural Technical Communication Research.” We also endeavor to identify current events in more popular publications that illustrate the various issues at the heart of these scholarly works to give the assignment kairotic gravity.

We also intersperse these moments of formal instruction and discussion with more light-hearted material, including clips from workplace sitcoms such as the “Diversity Day” episode of *The Office* (Daniels et al., 2005, March 9), the treatment of “green card marriages” in *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels et al., 2009, December 3), and the innumerable examples of racial misunderstandings in *Blackish* (Anderson et al., 2014–2022), to name a few. These types of classroom activities, based in both academic and popular texts, aid students’ depth of understanding as they create stronger, more nuanced deliverables.

This instruction and these discussions surrounding culture, identity, diversity and equity occur throughout the assignment, though their specific place in the chronology of the assignment differs semester-to-semester as sometimes we front-load them early on to provide a thorough theoretical foundation for students to work from, and sometimes we intersperse them more evenly throughout the assignment to drive home the applicability of these issues to the various cases and contexts the students are focusing on.

Additionally, students engage in considerable peer review and revision through all stages of the project as they help one another to identify and root out possible microaggressions, correct misreadings of rhetorical situations, and adjust any insufficient addressing of the issues and/or any language, tone, or content that might be unhelpful or have the potential to worsen the situation.

## Discussion and Reflection

With both parts of this assignment, we have found that the biggest hurdle is getting students to get outside of their own experiences and assumptions and to engage thoughtfully with the various issues of intercultural insensitivity and miscommunication. But we have found that requiring a series of deliverables composed from a variety of workplace roles intended for a variety of workplace audiences helps students move beyond their initial reluctance.

In Part 1, the incidents described in both cases have been intentionally designed to appear superficially minor and seemingly easily solved. As such, students tend to assume they immediately understand the problems and how to address them. Their initial solutions are usually relatively simplistic; as one student commented, “These problems could just be solved with an email. It isn’t that hard.” But as students dig deeper, they see that relatively minor problems are more complex than they might initially have realized.

For example, early in discussing this project, Sam has asked students to get into their assigned project groups and complete a small in-class assignment mapping out the various problems and concerns in one of the cases. As they do, they identify specifically who was affected by the case events and the possible effects of the events on each. Students identify if and to what extent these effects constitute additional problems or concerns, as well as potential issues that might arise if a concern is left unaddressed. Each group then briefly presents their issue maps to the class.

In such small group and class discussions, students often find that their interpretations of the situation differ from their classmates, which helps them see that their perspectives on the issue(s) are not universally held. Occasionally these differences in perception and opinion have led to tense discussions that, in a few instances, have required us to proactively intervene and mediate, particularly when there are considerable differences in culture and identity represented among the students. In doing so, we invite everyone to step back, and perform an informal rhetorical analysis of the exchange that has just taken place, identifying

which comments sparked strong emotions and how and why they did so. These instances of mild contention have provided some of the most lasting educational moments, as they provide authentic situations of miscommunication and misunderstanding that the whole class experiences. Such moments often turn into more general discussions of positively and fruitfully engaging in difficult conversations and working productively with others who have differing experiences and perspectives. It also allows us to emphasize the importance and difficulty of engaging in the mental and emotional labor of empathizing with a person who perceives things differently than you, and of allowing that empathy to color your response. In doing this we make a concerted effort to emphasize to students that this kind of diversity of perspective is precisely the strength of a multicultural, diverse workplace as it allows for more creative and innovative approaches to any work they might be doing.

To demonstrate to the students how this can happen, we often explain the genesis of this assignment and, more generally, the working relationship that the two of us enjoy. Namely, we embody a series of identities and lived experiences that exist in a stark contrast to one another. To name a few, we are a man and a woman, we are thin and fat, we are tall and short, we are white and Black, we live on the west coast and the east coast. As a result of these contrasting identities, the various projects on which we have collaborated, including this assignment, have come to demonstrate a much richer, nuanced, and more careful understanding of the topics we study and address. But we only arrive at these richer work products after working through myriad misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and overgeneralizing assumptions about the world(s) we inhabit.

When having these discussions about the value of multiple perspectives and doing the at-times difficult work of empathizing with those different from them, we make a special point of acknowledging that there are certainly people in many organizations—often those in positions of organizational and societal power—with whom it will not be possible to have productive relationships. We emphasize to students that they need not feel obligated to perform the aforementioned mental and emotional labor when dealing with parties who are unwilling to reciprocate and engage in that labor for themselves. We encourage students to critically consider, if and when they are confronted with such individuals, what level of toxicity they are willing to endure and to proactively plan exit strategies when necessary, recognizing that “exit” can mean many things, and not all of them require a two-week notice. To illustrate this kind of adaptability in the context of this assignment, we ensure students are aware that if such a toxic environment arises in the collaborative portions of the project, they are welcome to approach us with their concerns, and we can and will make alternative arrangements that will be more amenable to them, including, as appropriate, reassigning them to a new group or even allowing them to complete the assignment solo.

As mentioned above, we intersperse discussions and instruction about intercultural communication and inclusivity throughout Parts 1 and 2, because, despite extensive discussion of these issues in Part 1, students often struggle to connect those discussions to the case narratives they develop in Part 2. The first drafts of these narratives are often brief and underdeveloped, lacking nuance and sufficient depth of insight. Additionally, the narratives often focus on identity explorations that either reflect the kinds of experiences of discrimination that they might face (e.g., young white men writing about ageism) or that draw on stereotypes (e.g., a woman who dresses unprofessionally experiencing sexual harassment). In pushing students beyond these superficial case narratives, we encourage them to get outside their own situations and consider the experience of others (and *Others*) in more authentic ways. This active encouragement to move beyond the superficial is similarly required with the annotated bibliography.

In beginning to work on their annotated bibliographies, we often see students struggling

to transfer the research skills they learned in previous courses, perhaps partially because we ask them to engage popular, non-academic sources such as YouTube videos, comic strips, and “professional” content produced by organizations with murky leadership structures. We have found that as we encourage students to attend to questions of credibility and veracity of sources, students tend to put issues of social justice, diversity, and equity on the back-burner. We have found, however, that by pushing students to maintain focus on issues of social justice and inclusion, they are better able to evaluate sources, as the notion of “credibility” takes on a realistic context. As students make this connection, and as they practice evaluating sources through the lens of their case narratives, they exhibit an increased ability to empathize and get outside their own perspectives, resulting in reciprocal improvement to their case narratives.

## Conclusions, Future Revisions, and Applications

As we have taught our “Social Equity and Intercultural Communication in the Workplace” assignment over several semesters, we have found that it challenges students in ways they perhaps weren’t expecting in a TPC course. Even the most resistant students usually come to see that questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion—questions to which many of them have not given much thought (and which some students regrettably dismiss as trivial)—have larger implications than they might initially acknowledge. They ultimately find the project rewarding regardless of major, identity status, or life experience.

In our experience, students previously had the tendency to consider units focused on the genre expectations and constraints of professional emails, memos, and other interpersonal communication genres as either unnecessary repetition of things they have already learned, or, more positively, as a necessary but dry part of the course. But in framing this instruction through the lens of case studies of intercultural communication and conflict, we have found that students approach the content with more energy and enthusiasm and come to better understand how these seemingly innocuous genres both reflect and shape a workplace culture with regards to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In previous iterations of Part 1 of this assignment, we have included additional components that have been excised in the present form of the assignment to allow more time for Part 2. We have found these to provide fruitful areas of discussion and work for students, the collaborative work in particular. Here are some such components:

- A supervisor/HR representative email sent as a kind of rhetorical triage to acknowledge and preliminarily address the situation soon after the incidents in the cases occur but before a more detailed and thoughtful response can be composed and approved by company figureheads
- A collaborative proposal outlining specific recommendations that the company might take to directly address the roots of the problems
- Corporate rules/regulations regarding DEI issues, with an accompanying company mission statement that places greater emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion

In sharing this assignment our hope is that other instructors will find, as we have, that conversations about social justice, intercultural competence, diversity, and inclusion do not have to be awkwardly shoe-horned into existing assignments or one-off soap boxes. Rather, these conversations can be integrated into the fabric of writing assignments and courses without changing the expected outcomes, all while enhancing student engagement with realistic workplace concerns. As we do this collective work, students can complete the unit and/or course well-versed in specific genres, writing habits/processes, habits of mind, and research practices while also being more attuned to the politics of language, their own intersectional identities,

and their personal responsibilities for being responsive to inappropriate communication in all aspects of their lives. This in turn can, we hope, provide students with concrete steps they can take in the effort to build a more sustainably diverse and welcoming workplace and world.

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## ASSIGNMENT

# Social Equity and Intercultural Communication in the Workplace

## Assignment Goal

1. Practice composing and designing various workplace correspondence genres such as emails, letters, and memos
2. Consciously and critically consider ways that individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds/identity statuses and who have differing expectations for and styles of communication can come into conflict in workplace settings
3. Explore strategies and best practices for addressing and resolving workplace conflicts and difficult situations

## Assignment Overview

This assignment will consist of two parts, each part with two deliverables. You will submit all four deliverables as a portfolio at the end of the unit.

### Part 1 - Responding to Intercultural Conflict in the Workplace

You will select one of the cases (found at the end of this assignment sheet) of intercultural conflict and miscommunication in the workplace, and you will address the various concerns of the case from a variety of perspectives.

#### *Deliverable 1 – Employee Complaint Email (150-200 words)*

You will compose an email from the perspective of either the employee who is suffering from headaches in case 1 or Milena Mrozinski in case 2. Your email should include the following:

- Attention to professional email standards and expectations, including an appropriate subject line, greeting, and signature
- A clear and accurate description of your concerns with the situation in the office
- Empathetic acknowledgement of the complexity of the situation
- Sensitivity to the cultural identities and concerns of all parties

#### *Deliverable 2 – Supervisor/HR Representative Memo (300-400 words)*

You will compose a memo from the role of the supervisor in case 1 or the HR representative in case 2. Your memo should include the following:

- Professional memo formatting including header
- Discussion of how the situation is being handled, including steps that will be taken to prevent similar events from occurring in the future
- Clear, concise language
- Easily scannable design that facilitates readers' ability to easily identify key information



## Part 2 - Composing Cases and Resource Lists

For part 2 you will invent a case of workplace conflict and/or discrimination (implicit or explicit) based on one or more of SCAAR+ categories (sex, class, age, ability, race). Additionally, you will gather a series of resources that lend insight into your case that might be distributed by the company in response to the issue presented.

### *Deliverable 3 – Case Narrative (500-600 words)*

In your narrative you invent a scenario in which one or more individuals experience discrimination or conflict due to some aspect of their identity. In good cases there are no obvious or easy solutions to the concerns raised, and the individuals/characters involved should have real and logical (if misguided) motivations for acting in the ways they do. In describing your case, you should discuss answer some of these questions:

- What occurred?
- What cultural factors (company or societally) allowed this to occur?
- Who is involved in the event/scenario?
- What are their respective roles in the company?
- What power/privilege(s) do they have/experience?
- How might this incident influence performance?
- What are the values/assumptions/motivations of those involved?
- What blind spots might those involved have regarding how others might experience the scenario/event?

### *Deliverable 4 – Annotated Bibliography*

You will perform research and collect 15+ sources that address the various concerns and issues that arise in your case narrative. You will collate these resources into a single, visually appealing document that the company in your case might distribute to their employees. Please include the following:

- A brief contextualizing summary of the topic and issues explored in the list
- 15 publically available resources such as infographics, articles, reports, interviews, news stories, apps, etc. that address some aspect of the case topic/problem
- Correctly formatted APA/MLA citations
- Brief annotations and explanations that summarize, evaluate, and discuss how each resource addresses the case

## Case 1 - “Smelly ethnic foods”

Jaewon Park has recently started working at a tech startup for his first job out of college. After working at the company for a couple of months, Jae sees that a note has been left on the microwave of the communal break room that reads:

“Please DO NOT bring smelly ethnic foods to work for lunch! When you heat it up in the microwave it makes the office smell AWFUL, and it gives everyone who works next to the break room a headache! You know who you are. (especially you Mr. Kimchi-for-lunch-every-day) For the sake of your officemates, PLEASE stop!”

Jae feels that the note is directed to him because he always brings kimchi as a side dish for his lunch. He feels offended and singled out, but because he is so new to the company, and because the company prides itself on being relaxed and relatively informal, he decides not to say or do anything about it. Two days later, he goes to the same kitchen and finds some hand-written responses to the note. One of them (on the left of the image) reads, “RACIST!” in all caps, while

another (on the bottom of the image) reads, “No! You stop, Mr. Taco Bell-for-lunch-everyday!” Another commenter has sarcastically written (on the right of the image), “Please do not use Comic Sans. It gives everyone using the microwave a headache!”

For several days everyone in Jae’s division seems to be talking about the note, and he has several co-workers ask him what he thinks about it. Every time they do, he feels singled out again, and wishes it would all just go away.

## Case 2 - A well-meaning miscommunication

Linda Kramer is a mid-level manager at a technology company, and is having difficulty with an employee in her organization, Milena Mrozinski. Milena has been with the company for two years and has a generally strong performance, but recently, she has been markedly quiet in the weekly team meetings and rarely participates in her unit’s discussions. Linda has noticed Milena’s lack of participation and repeatedly calls on her in meetings, and in trying to understand the problem asks “Do you understand me?”

Midway through a big project, the company’s annual performance reviews were released. Linda met with each of her employees to discuss their reviews, and in meeting with Milena, Linda informed her that she had received a lower than average review. She encouraged Milena to put more effort into her work so they could get a strong response from the client. After the meeting, Milena began to call in sick more frequently and failed to submit a number of reports for the weekly meeting. Linda, noticing Milena’s ever-decreasing involvement and communication, decided to visit Milena at her home, where Linda received no response even though it was clear Milena was at home.

Since Milena started with the company, she has felt that her coworkers make fun of her and single her out because of her struggles with English, and so she has started contributing less in public settings. In doing so, Milena has proceeded to feel further demoralized because of Linda Kramer’s comments during the meetings, and it all came to a head following the annual review. Milena knew Linda was trying to help, but because Linda assumed that Milena was doing poorly due to lack of effort, Milena has felt depressed and completely unmotivated. To make matters worse, Milena knows that one of her colleagues has missed several meetings due to his being hungover, but Linda has never visited him at home or reduced his performance reviews.

After talking with some friends who work for another company who have experienced similar issues, Milena concludes that Linda has biases against international employees, especially those who are non-native English speakers, and decides to write an email to the HR representative to seek redress.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>While a thorough discussion of literature that discusses topics of intercultural competence, social (in)justice, imbalanced organizational power dynamics, inclusion, and other such topics in TPC scholarship is an important element in preparing to teach assignments such as the one presented here, the scope of this article does not allow for such. That said, in addition to the scholarship we discuss directly in this article, we include here a noncomprehensive list of sources that have influenced our work and that we have found particularly insightful in both crafting this assignment and preparing our day-to-day classroom practices: Nancy Blyler’s (1998) “Taking a Political Turn: The Critical Perspective and Research in Professional Communication,” Angela Haas’ (2012) “Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: A Case Study of Decolonial Technical Communication Theory, Methodology, and Pedagogy,” Natasha Jones’ (2017) “Modified Immersive Situated Service Learning: A Social Justice Approach to Professional Communication Pedagogy,” and Jeff Grabill’s (2005) “Globalization and the Internationalization of Technical Communication Programs: Issues for Program Design.”

<sup>2</sup>At the time Sherri developed and taught this assignment, she was at West Chester University.

<sup>3</sup>It has been noted that in titling this second case “A Well-Meaning Miscommunication” it can appear that we have understated the degree and severity of the supervisor’s fault in perpetuating linguistic bias through her microaggressive language. We would note that this title is intended as irony, drawing attention to the fact that power-imbalanced microaggressions and displays of cultural insensitivity are often wrongfully dismissed using language of this sort, with

the offenders excusing their actions on the basis of *intent* while ignoring the *effect*. We make this clear in presenting the case to our students, but we recognize that it may not be clear as presented here. In future iterations of this assignment, we intend to place scare quotes around “Well-Meaning Miscommunication” to draw more explicit attention to the irony.

## Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v7i1.100>.

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