Workplace Democracy and the Problem of Equality

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Abstract

Purpose: Professional communicators are becoming more invested in unique configurations of power in organizations, including non-hierarchical and democratic workplaces. While organizations dedicated to democratic processes may enact power differently than conventional organizations, they may fall short of practicing equality. This article explains the differences in non-hierarchical workplaces, considers businesses where democracy is a goal, and argues for considering equality as a habitual practice, particularly when writing regulatory documents.

Method: We conduct a review of the literature on non-hierarchical workplaces and organizational democracy, applying Jacques Rancière's concept of equality to two examples (one using primary data collection and one using secondary data) of two cooperatives where organizational democracy is integral to the design of the business.

Results: The literature review exposes an interest in *mêtis* (cunning, craftiness, flexibility) as vital to practitioner success in non-hierarchical workplaces; however, this article demonstrates that *mêtis* does not prevent inequality, even in organizations expressly committed to workplace democracy.

Conclusion: Professional communicators need to consider equality not solely as a structural resource (as in rules, laws, policies) but as a habitual practice to cultivate alongside other characteristics and frameworks important to a professional communicator's toolkit.

Keywords: ethics, cooperative, communication, democracy, equality

Practitioner's Takeaway:

- Professional communicators should be paying more attention to non-hierarchical workplaces, in particular, those with democratic aims.
- Democratic workplaces demand the development of certain ethical dispositions/characteristics in professional communicators: *mêtis* and equality as an ongoing practice.
- While the goals of democratic organizations are often noble, inequalities can still emerge, thus the need to recognize the equality of oneself and others as an ongoing ethical practice rather than something solved solely through institutional mechanisms.
- A heuristic, provided in the closing of this article, prompts professional communicators to examine their practices in terms of equality.

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Introduction

Professional communicators are continually becoming more invested in unique configurations of power in organizations. One of the modest aims of this article is to encourage more professional communicators to consider democratic workplaces as valid areas of research and employment. As Kimball (2006) rightly notes, while technical and professional communication (TPC) scholarship is expanding, most research still assumes an institutionalized organization marked by hierarchy and bureaucracy; however, as new technologies have changed the way professional communicators work, scholarship has shifted toward investigating flatter, more autonomous practices in the form of teams, networked organizations, and how companies make use of rhetorics of employee empowerment. Spinuzzi (2007, 2014), Clark (2006), Winsor (2001), and Zachry (2000), for example, have argued that relationships of power and communication go beyond a top-down structure. Thus, even within an apparently rigid bureaucracy, communication and power are more complex than they may first appear (Winsor, 2003). This research has unveiled the many means by which organizations (even ostensibly democratic ones) produce arrangements of power that place one person over another (Clark, 2006; Longo, 2000; Winsor, 1996, 2003). This suggests that while democratic organizations may enact power differently than conventional organizations, they can fall short of actualizing goals of equality.

As we state above, our main goal is to encourage professional communicators to consider non-hierarchical workplaces, in particular, democratic organizations, as legitimate sites of TPC research and practice. Now, not all non-hierarchical organizations aim to be democratic. And while we make this distinction throughout this article, we focus on workplace democracies in particular. *Democracy*, of course, can function as a god-term, or a term that carries high-emotional impact but may be rarely examined. While there are many definitions of democracy in political science and philosophy, we look to the oft-cited Bachrach and Botwinich (1992), who define workplace democracy as employees participating equally "in decision making at all levels in which they work" (p. 163).

In the first half of this article, we argue that workplace democracies require practitioners to cultivate qualities such as *mêtic* intelligence and an ethical disposition (in the sense of an Aristotelian virtue) committed to equality as an ongoing practice. In the second half, we apply our framework to two examples: one from primary research data and one from secondary data analysis. Through these examples, we show that even workplaces with explicit democratic organizational design can see acts of inequality emerge. We show that the organizational conditions and written policies can enable some employees to practice *mêtis*, making them feel empowered/enabled, but these resources do not necessarily extend to all employees.

Broadly, we argue that professional communicators should remain interested in workplace democracy. Such an investment should not assume that equality inevitably occurs in those spaces, however. For workplace democracy to succeed, it demands an ethic that recognizes equality (and inequality) in everyday practices and habits, not only in organizational design and writing practices, such as dispute resolution documentation or worker councils.

Overview of Non-Hierarchical Workplaces

TPC researchers such as Spinuzzi are beginning to look at communication, project management, and other workplace practices in non-hierarchical and networked workplace configurations (2013, 2015) and non-employee firms (2014). These organizations are sometimes referred to as "horizontal" or "flat," in contrast to vertical or "top-down" arrangements. This rhetorical framing enables stakeholders to envision themselves as equal partners, even if some organizations are "flatter," or more democratic, than others.

Despite the movement to understand workplace democracy in discourse and cultural studies for some time now (see Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1986), TPC has surprisingly little scholarship on the subject of workplace democracy and the distinctions of non-hierarchical organization. Spinuzzi, however, has taken up Waterman Jr.'s (1990) ideas on adhocracies to include "all-edge adhocracies"—which are highly collaborative, often temporary team-based projects extending beyond the organizational boundaries, or "edges" (Spinuzzi, 2015). TPC scholarship also has shown interest in networking and worker autonomy (Johnson-Eilola, 1996) and extra-institutional practices (Kimball, 2006, 2017). Outside of TPC scholarship, other researchers have

considered innovative workplace structures, such as the holacracy—a copyrighted management system operating by autonomous teams with a central decision maker (Robertson, 2015)—and distributed information-based systems grounded in a knowledge sharing (see, for example, Drucker, 1987; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1986; Skyrme, 2007; Thrift, 2005).

Nevertheless, many people are unfamiliar with, skeptical of, or even resistant to alternative workplace structures (Kastelle, 2013). For example, when Zappos converted to a holacracy and offered a severance package to employees who did not want to remain for the conversion, 29% of their workforce left the company (Reingold, 2016). Distrust of unconventional workplace practices also may be the cause of current resistance to Agile project management strategies (Denning, 2012). The values, practices, and frameworks that are well-suited for conventional, bureaucratic businesses, therefore, may not work in alternative workplaces. The unique characteristics of these structures require commitment to the development of deliberate strategies, habits, and philosophies.

We point to these distinctions, because, while scholars carefully consider arrangements of power in an organization, many of us take the manifestation of hierarchy for granted (Harrison, 1994, p. 249). This is an assumption that Hart and Conklin (2006) rightly critique when they argue for a redefinition of the role of the professional communicator. Their study participants showed "a vision of the profession that is non-hierarchical and highly networked" (p. 412). Nevertheless, as they point out, and as our own personal experiences confirm, hierarchy is often assumed in TPC pedagogy, practice, and research, and scholars from related fields (business administration, communication studies, etc.) have noted that many teach, manage, and evaluate success under the following assumptions:

1. "You need a hierarchy to succeed,"
2. "The people who do the work are of lower status than those who decide what work to do," and
3. "Organizations that do not follow the norms are likely to fail" (Kastelle, 2013; see, also, Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009; Cheney, 1995; Harrison, 1994; Rinehart, 2006).

Though the presupposition of bureaucratic management remains persuasive and fundamental to success for some, non-hierarchical and other democratic businesses have challenged this assumption and its underlying structuring of power. Scholars, practitioners, and entrepreneurs alike have continued to challenge the requirement of hierarchy by advocating for and instituting alternative forms of organizing work.

In an extensive survey of organizational democracy, Rothschild-Whitt (1979) compared collectivist-democratic organizations to conventional, bureaucratic organizations along eight points: authority, rules, social control, social relations, recruitment and advancement, incentive structures, social stratifications, and differentiations (pp. 511–517). Using these points of comparison, Rothschild-Whitt created a metric for evaluating organizational democracy. While Rothschild-Whitt's categories are almost four decades old, we still find value in them as her study is one of the few comprehensive studies of its kind. She categorized such different workplaces as falling along the following scale:
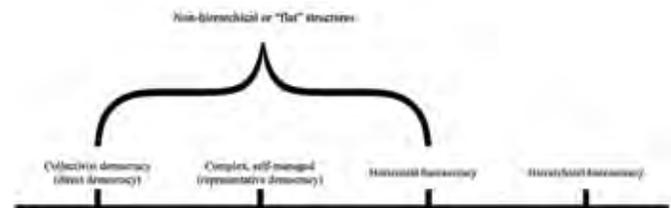

Figure 1. Scale of Organizational Democracy (Adapted from Rothschild-Whitt, 1979, p. 525)

According to Rothschild-Whitt's (1979) scale (see Figure 1), non-hierarchical organizations can fall anywhere along the first three categories but would not include the last (hierarchical arrangements). In this article, then, when we say "non-hierarchical," we refer to any type of arrangement within these three categories. Importantly, the scale shows that horizontalism, or non-hierarchy, does not equate with democratic commitments. In other words, it is important not to conflate non-hierarchy with workplace democracy. For instance, adhocracies (Waterman Jr., 1993; Spinuzzi, 2015) and holacracies (Robertson, 2015) are flat and non-hierarchical but not democratic, in the sense that they are not rooted in democratic goals. Organizations may try non-hierarchical arrangements not because of ideological commitments to democracy; instead, they may see these arrangements as pragmatic to their goals of increased productivity or employee buy-in (Craig & Pencavel, 1995; Kato, Poutsma, & Ligthart, 2017; Valve, 2012; Zwick, 2004).

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What distinguishes a *democratic workplace* is not just its methods but its end goals of highly participatory employee engagement, more equally distributed compensation, and/or more employee control of the workplace (Bernstein, 1982; Brodwin, 2013; Cheney, 1995; Harrison, 1994), which we discuss further below.

Some well-known companies have experimented with or otherwise adopted non-hierarchical workplaces or ownership models, including the Associated Press, Land O' Lakes, Organic Valley, Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI), tens of thousands of credit unions, and democratically run businesses, such as Patagonia, Github, Valve, WordPress, and 37Signals. Understandably, some readers may question the economic practicality of democratic workplaces, because most of us are just not used to talking about them. Nevertheless, the viability of such organizations has been well documented (see, for example, Brodwin, 2013; Craig & Pencavel, 1995). While establishing the viability of these organizations is beyond the scope of this article, we do hope that the short list above shows the growing need to investigate the non-hierarchical workplaces in which professional communicators might find themselves. This list should also demonstrate the need to continually reevaluate how we understand concepts such as democracy and equality.

Democratic Workplaces

While any organization can employ elements of democracy, not all non-hierarchical structures are necessarily committed to workplace democracy as an end unto itself. Bernstein (1982) offered one metric to measure democracy in those workplaces explicitly committed to democratic ideals. This metric has been used to evaluate development strategies (Cheney, 1995) still being used in cooperatives today (see cultivate.coop; ica.coop; Mondragon Cooperative Corporation; nasco. coop; University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives) and is often cited in cooperative theory (Cheney, Santa Cruz, Peredo, & Nazareno, 2014; May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007; Williams, 2007). Bernstein's (1982) original metric defines workplace democracy along the following points:

1. "The *degree* of control workers enjoy over any particular decision,"
2. "The *issues* over which that control is exercised," and
3. "The organizational *level* at which their control is exercised" (p. 53; Cheney, 1995; see, also, Kaswan, 2013; Kato, Poutsma, & Ligthart, 2017).

This metric demonstrates the most fundamental aim of workplace democracy: participation (Cheney, 1995). As evidence, Bernstein describes participation as occurring along a continuum (1982, p. 57). The most minimal form of worker participation is the "suggestion box," in part "[b]ecause it lacks face-to-face communication and frequently does not include even a response by management" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 57). Bernstein names worker councils or assemblies as best meeting the above metric, when workers exert full control over the organization and managerial decisions (1982, p. 58). Isthmus Engineering and Manufacturing (Billeaux, Reynolds, Young-Hyman, & Zayim, 2011) and Co-op Cab (discussed below) are examples of such democratic control. Employee participation rather than ownership is the fundamental component of democratization because "firms which are entirely worker-owned" can still "lack any degree of democratization" (Bernstein, 1982, pp. 76–77), as in the case of employee stock option plans.

In looking at organizations that are not top-down, we must not conflate the differences among alternative organizations. Flatter, or horizontal, businesses have fewer levels of management and may distribute knowledge and decision making more equally than conventional businesses. That is, employees or teams of employees may act autonomously, but the organization may include centralized decision makers (Drucker, 1987; Robertson, 2015; Waterman Jr., 1993). In contrast, an intentionally democratic business "involves management that is less autocratic and confers more power on individual employees" (Rayasam, 2008, para. 3). A workplace based on an ideal of democracy may include voting systems, debates, town hall-style forums, or branch autonomy (Rayasam, 2008).

One Type of Democratic Workplace: The Cooperative

Historically, workplace democracy in the US has two important threads: African-American collectivism and the late 60s–70s counterculture. African-American communities have engaged in collectivism since the Antebellum era as a way to meet their economic and political needs (Gordon Nembhard, 2014). Communalism and collectivism arising from 60s–70s anti-authoritarianism brought about communal ownership and living arrangements, such as land trusts, housing cooperatives, and communes (Rothschild-Whitt,

1979). The contemporary cooperative in the US owes its existence in part to these movements. At its most bare definition, a cooperative is a business that is owned by the people who use it (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 2) and that could fall under any of the categories in Rothschild-Whitt's (1979) scale of organizational democracy (see Figure 1), even hierarchical, depending upon its degree of democratic commitments.

There are three types of cooperatives: consumer, producer, and employee (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 3). First, in consumer cooperatives, people pool their resources to meet needs not supplied elsewhere or that are too costly for individuals (p. 3). One example of a consumer cooperative is neighbors in a food desert opening a grocery store to provide healthy, affordable food options. The consumer cooperative may be the most common and may feel to some shareholders (consumers) to be the least democratic. Commonly, the consumer would purchase a membership (a "share") and then exert control through electing their Board of Directors or through other avenues provided by the cooperative. A second type is the producer cooperative, formed as a business that jointly purchases supplies or jointly processes and markets goods and materials, for example, agricultural cooperatives (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 3). Finally, employee cooperatives are formed so employees can "own and manage a business themselves," in order "to stabilize employment, make policy, and share the profits" (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 3). Though conditions may vary, of these three types of cooperatives, an employee cooperative most closely fits the definition of a democratic workplace, because the employees have influence over how the business is managed.

To this point, we have now designated the kind of workplace most likely to engage in democratic practices—a workplace committed to aims of employee democracy. We have taken the time to make this distinction in order to better prepare professional communicators who might find themselves working in any organization that lays claims to non-hierarchy or democratic practices. Looking at these kinds of organizations is important, because of TPC's sometimes over-emphasis on hierarchy and bureaucracy, especially as professional communicators are more likely than ever to find themselves working in some type of non-hierarchical workplace (Hart & Conklin, 2006; Johnson-Eilola, 1996).

It is important to recognize that even those organizations committed to workplace democracy may at times struggle to practice equal participation. "Non-hierarchy" and "democracy" can sound sexy to professional communicators looking to find meaningful employment, but that does not mean they won't find themselves in an organization that falls short of its democratic goals. In other words, just because an organization has structural resources (policies, rules) dedicated to democratic practices does not mean that its employees automatically know how to practice equality, something much easier said than done, and something not easy to define. This is the larger point of this article: that unless professional communicators have developed certain ethical dispositions, they will struggle or meet resistance when working in non-hierarchical organizations, in particular, workplace democracies. In the sections below, we further explicate this exigence, advocate for examples of such ethical dispositions, and then apply them to two examples.

The Exigence for Dispositions of *Mêtic* Intelligence *and* Equality

We use the term *disposition* here in reference to Aristotle's virtue ethics (2004). Broadly conceived, traditional definitions of ethics are defined as "the study of values and proper conduct" (Markel, 2000, p. 21). Consistent with this definition, but more specific, Aristotle described ethics as centered around the term *hexis*, which can be translated as habit, comportment, characteristic, or disposition. This focus on dispositions, rather than fixed moral principles, is a result of his belief—and that of many contemporary virtue ethicists since (see, for example, Vallor, 2016)—that ethics are messy, always context-specific, and cannot be pinned down in any absolute sense. Nevertheless, this criticism of fixed principles does not preclude agreement on certain ethical dispositions. Some of Aristotle's examples of virtuous dispositions include patience, truthfulness, and generosity. As a brief example, while two parties might disagree on what a disposition of patience looks like in some exact sense, usually they will agree that patience is a moral characteristic, or disposition, that is good for one to inhabit, for one to cultivate and develop.

One example of the kind of dispositions needed for success in non-hierarchical spaces, and which has received attention lately in TPC scholarship

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(Pope-Ruark, 2014; Wilson & Wolford, 2017), is "*mêtic* intelligence." *Mêtis* (cunning, craftiness) is a term used by ancient Greek rhetoricians referring to the cultivation of a flexible form of creativity that could be used across particular or unexpected circumstances. It is a form of what Aristotle (2004) called *phronesis*, or the pragmatic forms of reasoning that characterize the sort of everyday decisions professional communicators make. A simple example of *mêtis* might be a professional communicator determining the kinds of euphemisms that are acceptable or appropriate to use in a company-wide memo determining, explaining, or critiquing bathroom policies regarding transgender individuals. A person with a *mêtic* disposition will be rhetorically flexible toward what (in this case) might not be an everyday company memo—a memo that, depending on the circumstances, may require a not-so-everyday response.

One argument for the need to cultivate *mêtic* intelligence in professional communicators occurs within a discussion of the software project management strategy Agile (Pope-Ruark, 2014). Whereas traditional project management philosophies such as "waterfall planning" privilege top-down management that supports a clearly defined final project, Agile is specifically designed to be used in a non-hierarchical space, whether that space is an organization as a whole or simply a cross-functional team. Agile requires the flexibility needed to respond to unexpected circumstances, "*situationally specific strategies*, processes and practices" (Anderson et al., 2005, emphasis in original; qtd. in Pope-Ruark, 2014, p. 329).

In evaluating hierarchical versus non-hierarchical management strategies, Pope-Ruark (2014) argues that *mêtis* adds "depth to our reading of rhetorical situations, decisions about appropriate response, creativity in invention, and concern for ethical production" (pp. 327–328). The context of this comment occurs in her discussion of how hierarchical content management systems often require two rigidly stratified classes of users: one responsible for setting tasks, the other waiting upon instruction with little room for independent initiative. By comparison, Agile predicates itself upon a decentralized system where all project stakeholders (whether managers, coders, engineers, subordinators, etc.) are on equal footing in terms of the ability to create and interact. In brief, Pope-Ruark (2014) claims that using project management methodologies designed

for non-hierarchical systems demands a certain kind of professional communicator: one with a *mêtic* disposition.

We believe that this starting place is a crucial spot for thinking about the complexities of ethics in democratic workplaces. While the recent advocacy of *mêtic* intelligence in TPC scholarship is persuasive, one issue is that it carries no guarantee of the kind of ethical behavior most professional communicators would promote. One might very well find cunning and craftiness in an "ethic of expediency" (Katz, 1992). Dolmage (2016) also notes that *mêtis* is not necessarily an ethical good; rather, it requires a supplemental moral purpose to achieve ethical ends (p. 163). In a comment we do not mean as critical, neither Pope-Ruark (2014) nor Wilson and Wolford (2017) define the kind of supplemental ethics that a *mêtic* professional communicator should embody. As we demonstrate below, ethically questionable practices can occur even in workplaces intentionally designed to be democratic. These non-traditional workplaces that professional communicators are becoming more invested in demand more specific ethical supplementation.

Thus, just as *mêtic* intelligence is continuing to be promoted in TPC scholarship, we believe it is necessary to think more specifically about other kinds of ethical dispositions that complement the methodologies, work arrangements, and organizations that benefit from *mêtic* intelligence. We believe that such additional ethical supplementation includes a disposition committed to equality, which understands equality not only as a resource to distribute but as a habitual ongoing practice that is a characteristic (or disposition) of a good professional communicator.

For the remainder of this article, we apply such a notion of equality—as a dispositional ongoing practice rather than solely a resource to redistribute—to two examples of intentionally designed democratic workplaces: (1) a case study originally conducted by Hoffman (2005) on an employee cooperative that experienced ethical communication conflicts, and (2) a primary study conducted by one of the authors on a cooperative that saw social capital disrupt a commitment to equality. We hope to show that, even with the best intentions, and within organizations intentionally designed with democratic values like those described by Bernstein (1982), inequality can still occur. For democratic and non-hierarchical workplaces to succeed, then, practitioners need to approach

equality as ongoing practice, as a crucial, habitual characteristic of a professional communicator.

Equality as an Ongoing Practice

Most professional communicators will acknowledge that ethics is a core value to the field. The field has embraced what could be called ethical turns, including social perspectives (Blyler & Thralls, 1993) and cultural studies perspectives (Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2007), which investigate issues of power and legitimacy. However, even with these culturally conscious turns, Dombrowski's (1999) and Markel's (2000) foundational works on ethics in the field, and a special issue on ethics more than a decade ago (Dragga, 2001), ethics courses are still "not highly represented" in TPC curricula (Meloncon & Henschel, 2013). Calling attention to particular ethical frameworks, such as utilitarianism, deontology, or virtue ethics is uncommon.

The recent calls for incorporating *mêtic* intelligence in TPC (Pope-Ruark, 2014; Wilson & Wolford, 2017) are clearly motivated by ethical concerns. In paying attention to non-hierarchical spaces, Pope-Ruark's (2014) advocacy for *mêtic* intelligence is clearly motivated by an implicit democratic or egalitarian ethic. That is, work on *mêtis* is interested in philosophies that believe workers feel more fulfilled or content and are more effective in their workplaces if they have greater influence. This is not to say all work on *mêtis* is invested in equality or that ethics always equates to equality, only that an ethic invested in notions of equality appears to be a driving force for those interested in workplace democracy.

Democratic workplaces are thus prime locations to investigate the relationship of *mêtis* and equality. The logistics of "horizontalism" are not necessarily difficult; however, the challenge comes in finding employees who are committed to values of collective work (Hartman, 2010). For example, the use of a non-hierarchical methodology may enable those who have cultivated *mêtis* to have a better chance of succeeding within a democratic workplace, but the creation of such a space in no way guarantees that even those with *mêtis* will take part in the type of egalitarian practices their workplace would seem to demand.

To reiterate, the concept of *mêtis*, which a number of scholars (Detienne & Vernant, 1991; Dolmage, 2009; Hawhee, 2013; Pope-Ruark, 2014; Scott, 2008; Wilson & Wolford, 2017) have drawn upon in the

rhetorical tradition, is a form of "bodily intelligence" (Hawhee, 2013, p. 46). It is often translated as cunning, wily intelligence, or wisdom (Dolmage, 2009 p. 5). *Mêtis* is an acquired type of intelligence that enables one to act with cunning across a wide variety of contingent rhetorical situations, a "flexible, context-attentive intelligence" (Scott, p. 2008). It is precisely this capacity for flexibility and context awareness that makes *mêtis* so relevant to professional communicators.

If collective work demands or at least benefits from professional communicators developing *mêtic* intelligence, then such constraints also demand a specific commitment to an ethical framework that values equality. Much as some scholars (Detienne & Vernant, 1991; Dolmage, 2009; Hawhee, 2013; Pope-Ruark, 2014; Scott, 2008) view *mêtic* intelligence as a supplement to practical wisdom, we view a dispositional ethic of equality as a necessary supplement for effective work to take place in non-hierarchical and democratic spaces, whatever forms they may take. In other words, for these workplaces to function as they are designed, they also require participants to commit to an ethic of equality. By a commitment to equality we do not mean a general value in equality, such as in the statement, "I believe we are all equals." Rather, we suggest a commitment to equality that recognizes that even in the most democratically driven spaces—such as employee-owned cooperatives—acts of inequality can happen. Thus, a disposition committed to equality as an ongoing practice is a necessary supplement to the contemporary professional communicator's toolbox. For the articulation of such a disposition, we turn to the French political philosopher Rancière (1995; 1999).

Rancière (1995; 1999), whose work has been applied convincingly to U.S. contexts (see Ross, 1991; May, 2008), differs from a number of other contemporary political theorists, because he views equality not as something to be distributed—that is, as an institutional provision like a right to vote, which is often the case for liberal notions of equality (see Colton and Holmes, 2018)—but as a practice requiring continual verification. Even within a representative democracy, Rancière argues that hierarchies—what he calls "partitions of the sensible"—will inevitably form. In brief, by "sensible," Rancière means that hierarchical partitions seem intuitive to us. They seem to be "common sense." For example, even though the Occupy Wall Street movement in Zucatti Park

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claimed an ideological commitment to democracy and egalitarian governance, White male activists nevertheless dominated group deliberations, and the Occupy movement even faced accusations of anti-Semitism (Berger, 2011). As a result, the Occupy Wall Street participants were moved to eventually require a rule to ensure that non-White and female speakers were able to speak before a White male.

We use the example of Occupy Wall Street not to dismiss the impact of this movement but more to highlight Rancière's argument that inequality and hierarchy inevitably occur even when direct democracy or equality is the designed system of distribution: "'Social reality' is a reality of inequality" (1995, p. 48). A partition of the sensible can and will occur in any text, discourse, community, law, family, church, or organization, and these partitions can include any cultural habit and/or practice that prohibits or limits even one individual from being recognized as an equal. A clear example is when segregation in the deep south banned African-Americans from sitting in "Whites only" restaurants. What Rancière (1995, 1999) calls a verification of equality consists of acts of "dissensus" (1999) that disturb any partition of the sensible, such as when African-Americans staged sit-in protests in "Whites only" diners. In Rancière's terms, the protesters sought to verify their own equality within a legal and state-supported partition of the sensible that did not recognize or intentionally masked their equality.

While a sit-in is perhaps an obvious example, Rancière (1995; 1999) argues that partitions of the sensible occur in even the most democratically designed spaces, as our examples below demonstrate, sometimes even in places marked by an abundance of consent. For example, employees who cannot afford to leave their jobs may feel it necessary to consent to their own mistreatment in order to stay employed. Thus, understanding equality in Rancière's terms means that one is never complacent or content by the institutional mechanisms or structures within which one is situated, even if a particular structure was designed in the name of democracy. If one is committed to equality as Rancière sees it, one recognizes that any verification of a person's equality might be fleeting at best and may require renewed practices of recognition: first, the habitual re-appraisal of a situation to determine whether someone's equality may be going unrecognized and, then, the demonstration (whether grand or small)

that this someone (whether oneself or another) is an equal and deserves to be treated as such. Again, as counterintuitive as it may seem, such verifications of equality can often take the form of dissent in appearance. A demonstration that equality is not being verified will disrupt the stable order of things, even if that order was established through consent. While this notion of equality as an ongoing practice may sound exhausting, it is important to realize that we see this notion of equality as dispositional, as a habit that can be cultivated. While habits are not always easy to make or break, the strength of Rancière's idea of equality is that it enables enactment anywhere; it does not require institutional structures to verify one's equality.

To make the significance of our connection between Rancièreian equality and *mêtis* explicit to professional communicators, we want to affirm that we are not arguing for a specific communicative act but a disposition that can be applied to multiple forms of technical writing. Equality in Rancière's sense is akin to an Aristotelian virtue ethic in that there is no fixed version of its enactment, but it is a practice. According to May (2001), practices comprise
(1) goal-directedness,
(2) social normative governance, and
(3) regularity of behavior.
First, practices have a purpose, an aim in mind. Second, practices are governed socially and normatively: Multiple people will know how to carry out the practice, and there will be standards determining (often multiple) correct and incorrect ways of doing it. Finally, practices contain a regularity of behavior: "In order for something to be a practice, the various people engaged in it must be able to be said to be 'doing the same thing' under some reasonable description of their behavior" (May, 2001, p. 12). As a basic example, most professional communicators practice proofreading on some level, yet they proofread at different times for different purposes (editing for content, grammar, design, etc.). They do so differently but with enough similarity that they can recognize the practice of proofreading a document, and they recognize that there are better and worse ways of proofreading.

Equality, then, is not something that is always going to look the same to each person, and this can be difficult when trying to conceptualize it as a professional communication practice; however, equality in Rancière's sense is based in practices, one's repeated actions in

re-verifying one's or another's equality whenever one sees that equality being erased or ignored. This practice of recognizing others' equality could be employed when writing policies, internal memos, manuals, even casual emails (or not, as in the case of sexual harassment). Thus, we claim that professional communicators should develop dispositions in which they see equality as a cultivated habit that might be put into practice in different situations and actions, including democratic workplaces. Again, above any other contribution, Rancière sees political equality as something that must be continually re-verified by individuals whose daily lives are impacted by partitions of the sensible and, in turn, aided and allied by individuals who can recognized this struggle in others and be in a position to be an ally or advocate.

Cooperatives, *Mêtic* Intelligence, and the Need for Dispositional Equality

Even democratically controlled organizations, such as employee-owned cooperatives, can have inequality demonstrated within their organizations. Correspondingly, we see within these scenarios an ideal opportunity to locate the need to cultivate dispositions of *mêtis* and equality as an ongoing practice. One example of such a demonstration of inequality within a democratic workplace is found in Hoffman's (2005) case study of Coop Cab and Edenfield's (2018) study of Owen's House Pub.

We look at these two examples (one is secondary research; the other is primary research) for a variety of reasons. First, each organization relies on professional communication and documentation in order to function, including dispute resolution documents such as incident reports, grievance process instructions, and related documents (Hoffman, 2005; Edenfield, 2018). Some dispute resolution communication practices are potentially extra-institutional, such as when employees apply social pressure (Hoffman, 2005; Edenfield, 2018). Second, both define themselves as democratic workplaces—workplaces that often require researchers to look to alternative and non-expert sites that are less conventional to TPC research, including taxicab companies and pubs. While deciding what sites of TPC research are legitimate can be an ideological issue (Alvesson, 1991; Berlin, 1988; Blyer, 1995; Harrison, 1994; Herndl, 1991, 1993), we follow in the tradition

of those scholars and practitioners who view TPC broadly (Johnson-Eiola, 2004; Kimball, 2006).

Hoffman's (2005) study of Coop Cab focuses on procedural justice and how men and women differ in their dispute resolution communication strategies, formal and informal. A worker-owned cooperative taxicab company, Coop Cab uses a Workers' Council to solve disputes after formal complaints. Hoffman (2005) concludes that both men and women had misgivings about the grievance process. According to Hoffman (2005), when men had disputes, they saw the cooperative structure as affording them informal (one might say *mêtic*) opportunities to discuss conflict resolution with their worker supervisors; however, the flat structure also "discouraged them from using the formal grievance procedures," as recourse through the formal structure signified to them a failure to resolve any issues they had with their peers (2005, p. 69). On the other hand, Hoffman's study showed that women did not even consider the informal process. Their choices were reduced to "raise a formal grievance or to do nothing" (2005, p. 70). Thus, the ways that grievances were resolved in this particular employee-owned business potentially produced unequal power relations, in some cases leading to employees leaving, and, in other cases, legal consequences.

Although she does not use the term, Hoffman (2005) is clearly describing partitions of the sensible, as Rancière would put it, as well as an institutional context that could benefit from the cultivation of *mêtic* dispositions committed to equality. Hoffman's study shows how "informal power and other societal inequalities may sufficiently permeate democratic workplaces and perpetuate the difficulties women contend with in formal grievance resolution" (2005, p. 52). Put in terms of *mêtis*, certain informal conventions of Coop Cab enabled men to practice forms of cunning, craftiness, and flexibility in their communication but seemed to restrict women from participating in the same types of communication. These conventions gave men an advantage in resolving their grievances. Two different examples of the difficulties women faced in Coop Cab as a result of the "informal power and social inequalities" include the cases of "Ursula" and "Shirley." According to Hoffman's study, Ursula was one employee of Coop Cab who articulated that the grievance procedures were "to act formally or not act at all," and that not acting at all was

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sometimes better because of the stress and anxiety that occurred as a result of the formal process (2005, p. 70). She felt that the formal process placed the burden on the person writing the grievance documentation:

> It's like, how much am I willing to put up with? How much energy do I feel like putting into paperwork and filing a grievance and trying to articulate relatively minor things to other people? Not necessarily that they are really minor, but I don't have that energy. It's like, is it easier to fight for certain things or is it easier to put up with it and wait through it 'til you get to the end of it? (Hoffman, 2005, p. 70)

A more extreme case is that of Shirley, who felt her only recourse was to sue the cooperative. Hoffman writes, "Shirley had brought several grievances before the Workers' Council and anticipated bringing more in the future" (2005, p. 72). The Workers' Council, whom she saw as her peers, ruled that her grievance would not make it to an official hearing to be heard by the Workers' Council. Even though Shirley used a formal process—writing a grievance report and submitting it to the Workers' Council—to ensure democracy, her appeal was denied. This denial of a hearing was a clear demonstration of a partition of the sensible emerging. Similar to Ursula, Shirley did not see any recourse in an informal process, even though the formal process failed her; however, she felt so strongly about her grievance that she decided to go outside of the cooperative via a lawsuit. Unfortunately, one consequence of this decision was that her fellow employees began to shame her. This shaming bordered on harassment: "There were things all over the bulletin board that anybody who sues their own cooperative should get the fuck out if they're not happy. It's like, if you don't love your country, leave it, so to speak" (qtd. in Hoffman, 2005, p. 72).

In contrast to Ursula's and Shirley's experiences, the male employees at Coop Cab felt that tolerating the anxieties of the formal process was not even an issue. In this particular work environment, and from their perspectives, their own experiences offered no partitions of the sensible to overcome. Rather than "this or nothing," the men's choices were among an array of informal dispute resolution options (Hoffman, 2005, p. 70). Most of the men at Coop Cab who had a grievance believed that for most conflicts, the Workers' Council

did not need to be bothered, as another example from Hoffman demonstrates:

> Jon: You can't get so worked up. Like some people get all worked up and bring a grievance about everything. That's their right; that's OK. But, me, I like to just talk to the person. Like if I think a dispatcher isn't treating me fairly, I'll just go and talk to the guy and reason with him. I don't get all excited. (2005, p. 71)

In the cases of Jon, Ursula, and Shirley above, structural equalities such as formal dispute processes are "supposed" to be the same for everyone, but as these examples demonstrate, the dispute resolution processes opened the way for unequal treatment based upon gender difference. Male employees were clearly able to cultivate a rich sense of *mêtis* within these procedures, as they felt they were able to be flexible in how they communicated their disputes. However, these forms of *mêtis* were not reflective of equality in Rancière's sense. For Rancière, someone committed to equality will habitually re-appraise any situation in which even one person may be treated as less than another, and, in response, call for that person to be recognized as an equal. This call to recognize one's equality need not be a grand political gesture. For example, we might imagine that if the cooperative employees saw equality as an ongoing practice, they would be more willing to see that strict reliance on formal dispute resolution communication might inadvertently create conditions of unequal treatment. To rectify this situation, the solution is not that women in the cooperative should just adopt the *mêtic* practices of the men. Rather than saying Ursula and Shirley shouldn't "get so worked up," a hypothetical response rooted in equality from Jon could have been that they should not *have to* get so worked up. That is, Jon could have questioned why he felt he had access to informal options and they did not, and he could use his informal access to advocate for them. The unstated decorum of the workplace culture, even though explicitly committed to democratic principles, created a partition of the sensible that privileged men over women in terms of dispute resolution communication practices.

Jon's flexible reactions to disputes—i.e., accessing informal methods of communication—were *mêtic* in practice, but they did not recognize the women's equality.

If Jon worked out of a notion of equality as an ongoing practice, then he likely would be more sympathetic and even encouraging to Ursula and Shirley when they used the formal grievance process. In this example, then, we see that just because someone works in a democratic workplace does not mean they will inherently embody an ethic of equality. In other words, Coop Cab demonstrates that, while democratic workplaces may be able to cultivate a generalized sense of *mêtis* among some employees (the men, in this case), there is no guarantee that employees will treat each other fairly.

Of course, Coop Cab is not the only democratic workplace whose admirable goals of democratic participation are not without the challenges of unequal power relations. Owen's House, a pub in a working-class neighborhood that operates through shared management among 10–15 employees (ranging from bartenders to cleaning staff) and the Board of Directors, also demonstrated the kinds of unfortunate social inequalities that occurred in Coop Cab. As part of Edenfield's (2016) two-year study, five long-time participants of Owen's House were interviewed. One of those participants, "Lamar," mentioned in his interview that when conflict arose over an issue not important to an employee, it was expedient at times to allow those with stronger feelings to influence or dominate governance, ultimately shaping the cooperative in ways that may not have reflected the organization's democratic commitments:

> I feel like so many people involved are just nice fucking people, not that they aren't strong or not willing to fight for shit, but it's just not worth it to deal with the negativity and the backlash from standing up to someone. It allows people who are more controlling to control because the other people are like, "Okay, I'll just keep going and deal with my own shit." When the potential consequences are nastiness and negativity and it's something you don't feel strongly about, it's just easier not to participate. The people who are more forceful are the ones who are going to get their way because the rest of us, while we care, in all these little bitty things, it's just not worth it. (Lamar, personal communication, July 15, 2014)

Like Coop Cab, Owen's House had grievance processes dedicated to democratic procedures

(Edenfield, 2018). Nevertheless, as Lamar expressed above, instances of inequality could still occur (and not only along gender lines), even though democratic principles were central to Owen's House's mission. In cases such as these, consent is not necessarily an absolute ethical good, as it can undermine the democratic values of participation. Here, someone who has cultivated a dispositional ethic of equality would be wary of public unanimity or silent consent and look for opportunities to recognize the equality of those who are being silent, perhaps directly asking for dissent at times. For example, at Owen's House, those who found themselves continually taking the lead on writing and interpreting policy or taking the lead on projects might pause and bring attention to the fact that they are always leading the way, and that the same people continually leading is not necessarily a good thing. Even inadvertently, they may have perpetuated a partition of the sensible, in Rancière's terms. Taking equality into consideration, they would refuse to accept silence as consent; instead, they might invite others to participate, to disagree openly, and to create a dialogue.

These examples help to demonstrate our argument that while the cultivation of *mêtic* intelligence can lean toward ethical outcomes, the process is by no means inevitable. Inasmuch as partitions of the sensible continue to emerge within even those organizations explicitly committed to democratic principles, there exists a distinct need to cultivate a dispositional ethic of equality as an ongoing practice. This is a challenge. Equality will not inevitably be achieved within a stable distributive mechanism or institutional space by virtue of the existence of that space, even if certain organizations may engender these values more than others. Some employees working in democratic workplaces may be more inclined to come forward, to participate, to be opinionated. In certain instances, those people may be the appropriate person for the particular job. Nevertheless, a dispositional ethic of equality will habitually scrutinize the knee-jerk response to always look toward those same people to take the lead.

Conclusion and Notes Toward Cultivating Dispositions of *Mêtis* And Equality

Professional communicators do have the power to influence practices of workplace equality. A professional communicator always has some agency to impact the

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practice of equality, particularly if she finds herself in a democratic workplace. That is why cultivating dispositions committed to equality matters: A professional communicator can enact change.

There are three important points we would like our readers to take away from this article:

- Professional communicators should be paying more attention to non-hierarchical workplaces—particularly those committed to democracy.
- Democratic workplaces demand the development of certain ethical dispositions/characteristics in professional communicators: *mêtis* and equality as an ongoing practice.
- While the goals of democratic organizations are often noble, inequalities can still occur, thus the need to recognize the equality of oneself and others as an ongoing ethical practice rather than something solved solely through institutional policies.

While developing an ethical disposition committed to equality is no easy task, one of the ways people can consciously begin to do so is through reflecting on their practices. While developing new habitual practices is always a challenge, and a more in-depth guide to developing such habits is beyond the scope of this article, we do want to suggest questions adapted from May (2001) that individual professional communicators can ask themselves about their organization's practices when writing for dispute resolution and other regulatory documentation:

1. Goal directedness: What is the aim of this practice? What is our goal? In working toward that goal, are people being treated as equals in a given situation?
2. Social normative governance: What formal and informal processes and policies are preventing people from being treated as equals? What would it take to change those processes? What stakeholders are involved? Whose voice is not being heard?
3. Regularity of behavior: How can we redirect or change the habitual element of the practice that is undermining a person's equality? How can we make a habit of new behaviors that do support equality?

We realize that these questions are open-ended and only a starting point. Answering these questions is not easy and will not always look the same. Professional communicators asking themselves these questions should realize that this kind of reflection is not a "one

and done." Rather, continually reflecting on equality should be integrated into any organization that lays claim to democratic principles. This point is not to undermine democratic workplaces as "not really" doing equality, but, rather, we hope to help cooperatives and other democratic workplaces do what they do better. Practicing equality is not something that can be solved by institutional policy alone or by simply saying, "Let's be democratic." First, we must recognize that equality is an ongoing practice and one that needs to be cultivated as a dispositional habit.

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