

TECHNICALLY Speaking

The Official Newsletter of the STC at NC State

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New Directions

By Aisha Holmes, Editor

Happy New Year! I hope this issue of *Technically Speaking* finds you steeped in working towards successfully meeting your 2010 New Year's resolutions. I chose to go in a new direction this year and not make any resolutions. I, instead, took a more technical approach to this "resolution thing" and made some high level goals for myself and identified some key milestones to get me there. Sound familiar? Yes, it is a project plan, except it is for my life in 2010/2011.

Taking a new direction in life personally or professional is a challenging task, but it can be one of the most rewarding ways of recognizing your strengths and weaknesses. It can, also, provide opportunities for growth and expansion in your work and in your relationships with others. This issue takes a look at new directions in the field of Technical Communication and in the lives of alumni from the MS program.

In the October issue, the editor, Alison Weaver, wrote about making it to "The Finish Line" due in part because it was her final semester in the MS program and her last issue as Newsletter Editor. I would like to thank her, on behalf of the STC Officers and the student body, for her outstanding work on the newsletter and for hosting a great end-of-the-semester celebration at her beautiful home – thanks Alison and best wishes to your continued success! It may sound corny, but I think we all have several "mini" finish lines in our life that lead us to new paths that prioritize what, when, and how we will do things.

Please take a look at the fantastic articles from current students and the new directions technology is taking us in our research and professional work. Peggy Harvey describes a possible future for the development of online user manuals and Dan O'Keefe writes about the role of a technical writer in an Agile Development environment. Also, be sure to read updates from our Alums and the incredible work they are doing for the profession of Technical Communication and how the MS program aided them in their journeys.

I hope this issue will take you in a new direction and I encourage you to spend a little time this winter considering what to focus your energies on and to (1) identify the tasks and activities that matter most to you, (2) determine if they are in line with the direction you want to go, and (3) set out to do them. I invite you to send me your "new directions" and your progress on achieving them and I will report your progress, along with mine, in the next issue, email me at akholmes@ncsu.edu and have a wonderful winter! "

TECHNICALLY Speaking

STC Mission Statement: STC advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and media.

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<http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/>

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Social Media and Technical Communication

By Nicole Black, President

Most of us have social media accounts for personal use. They help us to stay connected with family and friends and keep up with current events. You might have noticed that businesses and organizations are beginning to have a rather increased presence in the world of social media. These organizations are taking social media seriously, and this means more jobs for technical communicators.

If you are interested in social media, you should begin thinking about how it can be used from a business perspective. While individuals do not need to create social media accounts with a plan and strategy in mind, it is imperative that businesses do, so that they portray the correct image and succeed in their goals. After all, the world of social media can be a scary place for companies. People can hide behind anonymity and take control of an organization's image very quickly and easily online. This is no business or organization should go into social media blind or on a whim because "everyone else is doing it."

It is important that each organization evaluate their audiences to create realistic expectations for how social media will increase business. It is also important that someone monitors what is going on with their company online. This may sound like an easy job that would not take much time, but for some companies, it is worth dedicating one position to this task because their online image and place within social media affects business.

I was skeptical at first about the idea of social media having a large impact on businesses. I changed my mind when I took COM598 PR and Social Media with

Dr. Richard Waters last semester. As I wracked my brain throughout the semester to come up with various social media campaigns, I began to see that managing social media for a company can be a significant job that allows for creativity and thinking on your feet.

For technical communication students, Dr. Dicks is teaching ENG583 Social Networking this semester for the first time to dive into how social media is affecting technical communication. If you are not registered for this course, but you would like to do some reading on the subject of companies and social media, I recommend the book *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*. This is required reading for both COM598 and ENG583, and it is both entertaining and informative.

I also recommend that you start thinking about social media from a business perspective. Think about your favorite companies or organizations. What are they doing with social media and can it improve? Look at what they are doing with blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and wikis. Do they use social bookmarking? Are their audiences also participants or are they merely spectators of what is being said? If you begin training your mind to think of social media in this sense, you will soon find that you are full of ideas, and with the way things are taking off, you might find yourself applying for that Social Media Manager position. "

The Future of Documentation: Adobe Community Help

By Peggy Harvey, Membership Manager

(Note: This article is adapted from a paper written for ENG 512 entitled, "Enabling User Interactivity with Documentation.")

Once upon a time, the first place users turned for help was to the user manual that came with the product. Today, even if a printed manual exists, the first place the majority of people turn is Google. People expect to find the answers to their questions online, and Google has replaced the user manual as the all-encompassing solution for users' problems.

Adobe, maker of FrameMaker, RoboHelp, and other tools that technical communicators use, has taken advantage of this trend and harnessed the power of Google by creating Adobe Community Help. Adobe describes Community Help as:

"[Bringing] together Help, instruction, support articles, videos, blogs, and examples from Adobe and community experts around the world. The Adobe custom search engine helps you find the best content available whether it's produced by Adobe or its user community. Results from online product Help are included whenever you search Community Help."

Adobe Community Help is much more than just a question-answer customer support forum. Instead, it is a new way of looking at documentation, incorporating the idea that documentation is any type of information that guides users. Adobe's approach merges user-generated content with the official product documentation, allowing users to search both systems simultaneously to find the answers they need. This one-stop shopping is similar to typing a query into Google with one main difference: Users can have confidence that the search results are all under the Adobe umbrella, avoiding issues associated with the legitimacy of information on a third-party site. In fact, the Adobe Community Help search function is powered by a customized Google search engine.

The type of information Adobe provides in its Community Help also differs from traditional ideas about documentation. Community Help draws from a wide array of media and resources, including videos, tutorials, tips and techniques, troubleshooting, blogs, articles, forums, code and design examples, and traditional Help topics.

Adobe Community Help content is created by both community members and Adobe personnel. Many community members who contribute to Community Help are Adobe Community Experts: customers who share their product expertise with the worldwide Adobe community. Adobe selects recipients of the title from those who best exemplify the program fundamentals of product proficiency, enthusiasm, and professionalism.

Adobe Community Help is fully moderated by Adobe and industry experts, and comments from users help guide other users to answers. Far from being an "anything goes" type of environment, Adobe takes an active role in Community Help and does not take the user-generated content it receives at face value. Instead, sites searched by the default Community Help search engine are hand-selected and reviewed for quality by Adobe and Adobe Community Experts. Adobe experts also work to ensure the top search results include a mixture of different content types, including both user-generated content and results from the official product Help.

As documentation models and users' expectations continue to change, Adobe recognizes that users are sometimes the source of critical information. Embracing user-generated content has enabled Adobe to expand their content base while still exercising control over the content users receive. Adobe Community Help also allows Adobe employees to keep their finger on the pulse of their customers and deliver the information users need. This is the future of documentation. Adobe Community Help is a great example of how one company is leading the way. "

Benefits of STC Membership

By Peggy Harvey, Membership Manager

If you have been thinking about joining or renewing your membership with the Society of Technical Communication (STC) and have not decided if it's worth it yet there are several benefits you should consider. Although the STC has changed its dues structure and annual dues have increased, at \$75 it is still a bargain for students. Also, while professional members with a basic membership have to pay for chapter and Special Interest Group (SIG) memberships separately, a student membership includes one chapter and one SIG.

Other benefits to consider are:

- The STC is a respected organization in the field of technical communication and membership looks good on your resume.
- The Carolina Chapter is active and very receptive to students, providing opportunities for leadership and service with the organization.
- Members receive discounts to events such as the annual conference and STC webinars.
- Networking.

The STC helps technical communicators by validating the work we do as professionals and providing access to tools and resources that allow us to advance and excel in our field. Ultimately, only you can decide if membership with the STC is the right choice, based on your budget, career goals, and the value you believe the organization brings to you. For me, as a student getting ready to re-enter the workforce as a technical communicator, the choice is clear. "



To Join STC or Renew Membership visit:

<https://access.stc.org/JoinSTC/>

*How YOU Can
Help NC State
Help Haiti*



Student Government, and the Center for Student Leadership, Ethics, and Public Service (CSLEPS) have partnered with Stop Hunger Now in the HOWL for Haiti relief campaign. Currently, over \$8000,00 have been raised. Many organizations and clubs are participating. You can join the Facebook page, just search for "Howl for Haiti," or join from the HOWL for Haiti website.

* Check out the HOWL for Haiti website at: <http://students.ncsu.edu/haiti/> There is information about how to donate

* Story from NC State's Featured Stories "Howling for Haiti" <http://www.ncsu.edu/featured-stories/engaging-society/jan-2010/haiti/index.php>

Picture source: <http://www.clipartof.com>

My Life-Post M.S. Program

By John Wilton Williams, Class of 2009

At a time when so many across this nation and in other parts of the world struggle in a tough economy, I feel somewhat apprehensive gloating about my fortune since I completed the M.S. program in May 2009. However, I would be somewhat remiss in down-playing my fortune and acting as if I am not exactly where I want to be in life (even ahead of my vision). I am living my dreams, and the M.S. program at NCSU prepared me well to pursue and realize those dreams.

I am currently employed as a User Experience Designer with IBM's Rational Software Group in Lexington, Massachusetts. My primary duties have me providing support for Rational System Architect, an enterprise architecture modeling solution. I also spend a portion of my work week supporting the Rational Learning team in their efforts to improve the user experience of Rational learning deliverables. So how did I end up here?

In September of 2008, I accepted a position with IBM's Rational Software Group as a user experience design coop. I worked with Rational Requirements Composer, learning the ropes and gaining increased responsibility as time passed. I performed accessibility assessments; I planned and conducted usability tests; I even performed some design work aimed at improving a somewhat problematic installation experience. Most importantly, I was able to demonstrate a willingness to listen, a limitless drive to learn, a tireless passion for user centered design and an undying advocacy for users of digital products. In April of 2009--just as I was completing my 675 work and my last semester in the program--I accepted an offer of permanent employment with IBM.

Wherever you land with your first shot to prove yourself, I encourage you to constantly look for opportunities to make yourself and your work

driven, etc—smart, talented and driven people are a given at IBM (and most other places you are likely to find yourself) . Thus, you will not exactly stand out if you try to rely on these qualities as your primary attributes.

You need to be able to show that you can contribute in a constructive and creative manner. If you find that you are done with your work, find something else to do. If there seems to be a shortage of work to do, then you are either in the wrong place or you are not looking. You need to be able to demonstrate that, if given the chance at any time, you would be willing and prepared to step in and do your job in a professional manner.

I have learned more in the past year than I will ever be able to fathom. Each day presents new challenges and new things to learn. However, the 3 years I spent pursuing an M.S. in Technical Communication at NC State provided me with the foundational knowledge, skills, wherewithal and confidence to succeed in my pursuit of a career as a User Experience Designer. Every day, I apply principles and knowledge gained in Dr. Dicks' intro class, project management, and usability courses, Dr. Swarts' *Online Information Design and Evaluation* course, and other courses I took as a graduate student at NCSU. I encourage you to decide as early as possible where you would like to go with your career. Advanced studies in technical communication can open a lot of doors for you and you will emerge from this program with a distinct advantage—people recognize the value of the credentials you seek and the degree to which the fine faculty at NC State are preparing you. You are in a good place and the future for those with advanced degrees in Tech Comm looks promising.

Finally, if any of you are interested in learning more about “a day in the life” or whatever, please feel free to contact me at ixdpro@gmail.com. ..

Technical Writing and Agile Development

By Daniel O'Keefe

If you are a technical communicator who works in software, you may have heard the term “Agile Development.” If you have not heard it by now, you probably will at some point in your career. As a writer who has worked in a company that uses Agile Development, I know that Agile can seem daunting, complex, and chaotic; but, if you can change your perspective, you might find it liberating.

In its essence, Agile Development is a type of industrial process that breaks large projects into several iterative mini-projects. Each development cycle includes planning, research, design, development, and quality assurance. Iterations typically last from one to six weeks. A project can be made up of as many iterations as is necessary. For example, I have worked on projects that included 6 or more 30-day iterations. At the end of each iteration, we had a small subset of the overall system, fully functional and fully documented. On paper, this may not seem different than a typical project, but in reality, it is quite different.

Agile breaks the project into smaller iterations to embrace a fundamentally fearful word: change. Agile was created with the idea that software development was not as straightforward as manufacturing. Things can change: customers may not know what they want, developers may discover problems far into the project, or the idea might not even be feasible. As a result, each iteration is purposely kept small to mitigate the risk. For each iteration on a project, the teams must be able to respond to changing requirements from stakeholders and must be able to course-correct if the product does not test well with customers. And if the feature is too large to deliver at the end of the iteration, the team must be willing to lower the scope so that they still deliver a piece of working software. In other words, the team must adapt.

As technical communicators, we must also adapt. Most Agile teams consider everyone a part of the team, technical writers are not an exception. Writers must be able to sit with the team in the project room (required in Extreme Programming (XP)) and be able to document the features as they are being developed. This can be challenging since the team is often unable to produce a prototype until the end of the iteration. However, this does not mean that tech writers sit around twiddling their thumbs for most of the iteration. I spend much of my time analyzing the audience, writing generalized article shells based on wireframes and comps, working with QA to understand the entire process and, in many places, looking ahead to future iterations with the business analysts on the project.

From personal experience, I have found that Agile gives software technical writers an opportunity to step outside of their typical role. As part of an Agile team, I have taken control over labeling and text within the interface, have worked on designing prototypes, have taken minutes in meetings, and have even facilitated customer focus groups and usability tests. While I signed up to write help articles, I have used my personal strengths as a communicator to help our development teams accomplish tasks faster and more effectively. I also have the respect of the subject matter experts, which makes it easy to get their time to help in documenting the feature.

Like most things in life, Agile is what you make of it. My advice is: get comfortable with change, learn to love uncertainty, communicate well and often, and when in doubt, take as many risks as you can. The team will back you.

Of course, this article barely scratches the surface of what Agile is and what it does. For more information, visit the Agile Alliance at: www.agilealliance.org/. "

Help Me Enhance the Technical Communication Profession

By Nathaniel Lim

When you tell your friends and family that you are a technical writer, what is their reaction? To me, they say that it sounds like an important job and probably isn't easy. When I tell them I write online help as part of my job, they often tell me that Help does not help. Unfortunately, this is sad but true. People get frustrated when they read poorly written documents and cannot find the information they need.

This is why I am running for STC Nominating Committee. I want to make a difference. From here, I could tell you my interesting biography, awards I've received, impressive accomplishments, extensive work history, decision-making process, and reasons for running. But, that is all in my candidate statement on the STC website. Here is the stuff I could not include:

Reliable: I strongly believe in accountability and follow through. If I say I will do something, I make sure it gets done (or tell people early enough in the process if I cannot do it, so we can go to plan B). I also believe in following directions and meeting deadlines. At the same time, if I don't understand the process or don't believe that the rule applies, I will ask questions until I am satisfied that this is the best way to go about it.

Critical Thinker: When I was a lead judge for the STC international tech pubs competition, a new procedure came into effect that required writing at least 24 comments on the judging form. Thinking that this would be too numerous, I inquired to find that this was not a hard and fast rule. The spirit of the procedure was to ensure that submitters received sufficient written comments and not just numbered ratings. Thus, I wrote critiques to help the submitters, not always conforming to the rule.

Innovator: My company recently started translating documents into several foreign languages. My manager gave me the task of creating a new

procedure for labeling them, putting them through the approval process, and posting them on our website for customers to download. Tracking and classifying over a hundred documents with different versions and languages could potentially fall into disarray. I was careful to think things through before taking action. I asked appropriate personnel for their input and drafted a formal procedure. Management approved. Although the procedure continues to get revised even to this day, I am proud that I was part of the first effort to formalize it.

You can also get to know me at LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/in/nathaniellim) and Facebook (search nathaniel lim impac).

Starting March 9, please take a minute to cast your vote for Nathaniel Lim. I would be grateful for your vote for Nominating Committee. "



Nathaniel Lim

Note from the Newsletter Manager

The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of *Technically Speaking* or of the STC@NCSU. Neither *Technically Speaking* nor STC@NCSU endorse candidates. This article is printed for informational purposes only.

Alum Updates

Anne Strickland

I thought measuring life in semester-based increments made time pass quickly – but it seems to fly past me regardless! I completed the MS Tech Comm program while working full-time at the North Carolina Bar Association (NCBA) in Cary. When I started the program, I was a Publications Manager. Somewhere in the midst of my studies, I accepted the Assistant Director of Communications position, which is where I remain today.

The NCBA is a non-profit organization – which often means that you wear multiple hats on any given day and learn to perform magic tricks while keeping a good sense of humor! The Assistant Director position is no exception to that rule. Editing, project management, web maintenance, copy writing, marketing suggestion, print production, minor design projects – the list goes on and on. Technical Communication ties it all together.

While my undergraduate studies aptly prepared me for the day-to-day tasks that I perform, the Tech Comm program allowed me to hone my skills and taught me more about how to better manage not only projects that I was running but how to be more effective all around. I am able to bring a new perspective to my department. I make better informed decisions, and educated suggestions. It's no longer, "hey, they make something that does that," it's "hey, why aren't we using this?" My perspective has shifted from the duties of a traditional communications department to include ideas about new technology and user-friendly solutions. Because my position covers multiple job descriptions in any STC catalog, it's helpful to have a handle on a variety of skills.

Tech Comm has enabled me to better juggle intricate projects, made me a suitable liaison to our IT department, helped me to develop an archival strategy that simplifies my work, and most importantly, given me the confidence that I am helping my organization reach end goals that are suited to our membership.

In my spare time, I am still working on multiple free-lance projects – mainly print collateral, web design, and graphics – for some local companies and isolated customers, but again, I find that all these projects are colored by what I learned in the Tech Comm program. Tasks often take less time that they did previously, and the results tend to be more user-centric, clean, and easy to navigate. It is fun to look back at my portfolio – pre- and post-MS – and look at how my pieces have developed. Sure, some of the polish is probably experience, but quite a bit of the change I can determine came from a pointer given by Dr. Dicks or Dr. Swartz, or an edit from Dr. Katz and Dr. Miller.

I look forward to returning to the [CRDM program](#) one of these days to polish and grow the skills I have been taught. In the meantime, you can find me at the Bar Center. "

Jason Winter

After completing many of my core classes in the MS program, my wife, Melanie, and I bought a house and moved to South Hill, Virginia. There were very few classes I still needed to attend on campus as I tackled the rest online. Since graduating in 2007, I have started my own web design company: Winter-netWeb Technologies (www.WinternetWeb.com).

My ongoing research today addresses the continued trends of web design and the emergence of new code technologies and practices. From my experience, I feel many web designers today would benefit from the skill sets learned as a student of information and graphic design, and that is just what I needed to pair up with my prior years of experience in computer programming. Together, the marriage of theory and practice gained through the MS program greatly helped me in my foundation to launch this new business. emailme@WinternetWeb.com "

Meet Your 2009-2010 STC@NCSU Officers



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STC-NCSU CALENDAR FOR THE 2010 SPRING SEMESTER

The following events are planned. Please visit the STC-NCSU web site or monitor future issues of *Technically Speaking* for updated information as it becomes available. All dates and events are tentative and subject to change. To read minutes from past STC-NCSU chapter meetings, visit <http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/meetings/index.html>.

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION
JANUARY 2010	ORIENTATION	TOMPKINS HALL
JANUARY 11	FIRST DAY OF CLASSES	
JANUARY 18	MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY	NO CLASSES
FEBRUARY 26, 7-9 PM	GAME DAY	TOMPKINS HALL
MARCH 15-21	SPRING BREAK	NO CLASSES
MARCH/APRIL	WWW2010.ORG CONFERENCE	RALEIGH CONVENTION CENTER
APRIL 1	SPRING HOLIDAY	NO CLASSES
APRIL	NCSU STC OFFICER ELECTIONS	VIRTUAL
APRIL 15-27	ENG675 DEFENSES	TOMPKINS HALL
MAY 15	NCSU SPRING 2010 GRAUDATION	RBC CENTER
MAY	END OF SEMESTER PARTY	TBD

Third Annual Game Day

Pit your wits against your fellow Tech Comm students for a friendly, yet competitive, evening of board games!!! Polish up on the ones that will require your technical writing skills like Scrabble, and Apples to Apples! Feel free to bring any of your favorite board games.

Refreshments will be served.

February 26, 7:00 p.m.

Location TBD

*Interested in Using Your New M.S.
Degree in Tech Comm?*

*Check out STC Carolina Community's
Job Bank*

[http://www.stc-carolina.org/tiki-index.php?
page=Employment](http://www.stc-carolina.org/tiki-index.php?page=Employment)