Tech Comm: Who we are in 2007

By John Strange

More than 25 new and returning students gathered Aug. 20 to begin a brand new academic year in NC State’s Technical Communication program and help form the student community in technical communication for 2007.

The one-hour orientation session, the first event of the fall semester 2007, was an opportunity to get familiar with Tompkins Hall, meet faculty members teaching upcoming classes, and celebrate a landmark year for the NC State student community for the Society for Technical Communication.

The STC named the community a “Community of Distinction” for 2007. “We are the No. 1 chapter in the world this year,” said Sarah Egan Warren, faculty adviser for the STC @ NC State. “This is the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup, the Emmy, the Grammy, the Tony of the STC.”

She said it was only the hard work of the previous STC officers, several of whom have graduated from the program, that brought the community the honors.

The 25-plus new and returning students attending the meeting represented a larger community of about 40 students working in various levels of graduate education.

According to Dr. Stan Dicks, director of the master’s program in technical communication, 12 or 13 brand new students are entering the program this fall. Twelve or 13 graduated from the program in the spring.

Who are Tech Comm students? According to Dr. Dicks, they are almost 50-50 male and female. This is a change from the recent past, where there were “significantly more females than males,” Dr. Dicks says.

Most – about two thirds – of the students are returning to school after having been in the workplace. The rest are here almost straight from their bachelor studies.

The program’s students tend to be young, too, says Dr. Dicks: “When you are as old as I am, everybody looks like a teenager, but the vast majority of MS students are in their 20s and 30s.”

About half of them are seeking to move into technical communication as a

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I’m excited to be co-leading, along with Andrew Armstrong, the student community of the Society of Technical Communication at NC State this academic year.

It’s a great feeling to know that when I graduate in December, our organization will be in good, experienced hands with Andrew at the helm. The co-leadership model is one we hope will continue in our organization’s future.

Andrew and I are working with a slate of committed, enthusiastic officers, and after our organizational meeting over the summer, we’re breaking out of the gate with events to help you establish program-long friendships early in the year, and as our mission states, to connect you to the future of Technical Communication.

One of our operating strategies this year is to partner in everything we do—with professors, with the local STC-Carolina professional community, with local community organizations and most of all with you, both as students and members of STC, in the MS in Technical Communication and the PhD in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media programs.

Last year, the STC named our organization an internationally award-winning Community of Distinction. Please join us in STC this year, as a partnership of people, to continue our journey as an achieving community.

I am excited to be the co-president this year. This is a chance to be directly involved with all the community activities planned for this year, and to learn from current President John Martin.

John will graduate in December, and I’ll “take the reins” as the spring semester begins. As co-president, I’ll gain experience working with the other officers and the entire student community. I’m sure this experience will be invaluable as I assume the role of our community’s president.

I encourage anyone who wants to be more involved with STC to consider becoming co-president next semester. It’s a unique opportunity; one that I’m looking forward to.
Evolution of the Web: More work for you

By Christin Phelps

The Web has evolved. Not long ago, computer users were forced to trudge through endless amounts of search engine spam to find the information they really wanted. But today, search engines are smarter, better able to locate and return more accurate Web sites. In essence, search engines have slowly begun to think and act like human beings.

This advancement in technology probably seems wonderful to most; the growing number of users who go online first when seeking information on any topic proves that. However, to the Web designer or technical communicator, this means more work.

No longer can a writer, developer, or designer assume a human audience will access and understand their content. They must now acknowledge and react to an artificial audience as well.

Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the Web as we know it today, says the next evolution of the Web (now dubbed Web 3.0, or sometimes referred to as the Semantic Web) will feature computers that are capable of reading and understanding the Web in the same way human beings do. In other words, computers will comprehend the text on the page, why certain sites link to other sites, and more. (See Weaving The Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web, Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000.)

Many technophiles predict that Web 3.0 is not too far off, but until computers begin “reading” text on a web page in the same way as a human being, technical communicators must adapt. In essence, writers for the web and website designers in general must alter the way in which they write, design, and lay out content on a page in order to compensate for the lack of understanding on the part of the machine.

So why bother? Billions of websites exist today, which equates to likely thousands on a single topic that a search engine is capable of locating and determine relevant to a search query. If a designer or writer expects any traffic to come to their site through a search engine, then it’s almost obligatory that they enact some form of search engine optimization on their website.

Search Engine Optimization describes a series of techniques that can be used to improve the search ranking of a particular web page and a particular website. The way in which the brainpower of a search engine locates and ranks websites changes on a semi-regular basis, forcing webmasters to be aware at all times of what the search engine industry is doing — or hire someone to keep track of it for them.

However, several techniques have remained somewhat consistently and legitimately acceptable and fruitful in improving search rankings.

The most important of these using unique content, on unique pages, using optimized text written specifically for the web. Unique content means that the content on a web page has not been repeated anywhere else on the web. Otherwise, search engines believe the web page contains duplicate content (i.e. why show someone your page when another page has the exact same content on it?). Webmasters can guarantee unique pages by ensuring that all standard meta tags (keyword and description) and title tags are different on every page of their website, even if it’s adding a ‘part 2’ to the title tag.

Optimized text refers to content that has been optimized and tailored for the web so as to make it easier for search engines to understand. The methodology in doing so can be long and complex, but essentially it refers to using exact, simple language with limited metaphors, colloquialisms, idioms, and slang.

Until Web 3.0 becomes a reality, webmasters, web developers, and writers for the web must be cognizant of the addition of an artificial intelligence to their audience, utilizing and adapting their HTML code and writing to make their pages easily comprehensible to search engines.
2007 STC @ NC State officers

John Martin, president

John Martin is a technical editor for IBM, where he edits the writing of several information developers who are devising software manuals and online help for enterprise-wide network management products.

He also works part time at the Center for Excellence in Curricular Engagement at NC State, where he uses technical communication skills as a special projects assistant.

In the 2006-2007 academic year, John was the newsletter editor for the STC community at NC State. He started the MS program in January of 2004, and will graduate this year in December.

Andrew Armstrong, co-president

Andrew Armstrong works as a communication and media specialist for the Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services at NC State.

This is his fourth semester in the MS in Technical Communication program.

He has been a member of the NCSU Student Community since starting the program in the Spring of 2006; this is his first semester serving as an officer.

Michelle Tackabery, membership manager

Michelle Tackabery is an interactive media manager for the Law Offices of James Scott Farrin in Durham and is responsible for content management, search engine marketing, and search engine optimization for the firm’s three websites.

This is her fourth and final year in the Tech Comm program at NCSU and her second year serving as an STC officer; in 2004-05, Michelle served as VP/Webmaster.

Continued from page 1

second or expanded career, moving in from other fields. The other students are fairly experienced in technical communication and are seeking career advancement through a graduate degree.

“The two biggest changes in the last few years are more people coming in directly from undergraduate study (about ten years ago there were almost none who did so) and more men,” says Dr. Dicks. “Another trend is people with engineering or programming backgrounds entering the field, which they see as more stable and less likely to be outsourced than their original fields and/or because they have decided that they like developing information better than their primary job.”

From the editor: To close on a personal note, I am a technical communication graduate student, practically brand new myself with only two graduate courses completed.

If I were to give you one piece of advice now, join up with this STC chapter as soon as you can. It is internationally recognized, but most important, this is a really good, fun group of people.

Job market

Employment opportunity information for MS in Technical Communication students is disseminated through the etc listserv, maintained by Dr. Stan Dicks. You’ll hear about hiring positions at the likes of IBM and SAS, as well as those at NCSU and other smaller companies in the Triangle area.
Technically Speaking

August 2007

Christin Phelps, treasurer

Christin Phelps is a recent graduate of the Technical Communication program and is beginning the PhD program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media this fall. She is also the director of information technology for Virante, Inc, a web marketing firm in Research Triangle Park.

Myra Moses, newsletter adviser

Myra Moses became involved with STC when she served as the Technically Speaking editor in 2001. After graduating from the Technical Communication MS program, she became the Faculty Newsletter Adviser.

Sarah Egan Warren, faculty adviser

Sarah Egan Warren became involved with STC while she was finishing her MS in Technical Communication in the late 90s. She was the treasurer and president as a student and has been the faculty advisor since 2000. She is a senior lecturer in the English Department and teaches ENG 331: Communication for Engineering and Technology, ENG 332: Communication for Business and Management, and ENG 314: Technical Editing and Document Design. She has served as the distance education coordinator for the Professional Writing Program since 2004 and will be the assistant director of the Professional Writing Program starting this fall.

Jennifer Riehle, webmaster

Jennifer Riehle works for the NC State Information Technology Division as a technology outreach specialist. In addition to designing and maintaining webpages she also writes and teaches Technology Education classes. This is her second year in the Tech Comm program.

Brian Swiger, secretary

Brian Swiger is a manual writer and technical trainer for NC State University’s Technical Outreach for Public Schools. This is his second year in the Technical Communication program. He enjoys spending time with his 9-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter in his spare time.

John Strange, editor

John Strange has been a writer, editor, and communications professional for more than 20 years, but is practically brand new to the Technical Communication program.

Almost 20 years after receiving his bachelor degree in journalism in 1986, Strange is returning to school, along with his wife, a master’s degree candidate in public administration.

He lives with his wife and two daughters (the oldest about to be a freshman at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire), in eastern Wake County.

Myra Moses, newsletter adviser

Myra Moses became involved with STC when she served as the Technically Speaking editor in 2001. After graduating from the Technical Communication MS program, she became the Faculty Newsletter Adviser.

Jennifer Riehle, webmaster

Jennifer Riehle works for the NC State Information Technology Division as a technology outreach specialist. In addition to designing and maintaining webpages she also writes and teaches Technology Education classes. This is her second year in the Tech Comm program.
As the incoming president of our STC student community, I had the privilege of attending STC’s 54th Annual Conference in Minneapolis May 14-16. I’m grateful for the opportunity to have attended, which wouldn’t have happened without the $1,000 scholarship I received from the STC-Carolina Community, our local professional community here in the RTP area.

The most valuable part of the conference for me was Leadership Day, held the day before the actual conference started. It was a full-day session for leaders in all aspects of STC—from leaders of student and professional communities, to Special Interest Group (SIG) leaders, to the leaders of the STC International organization.

The sessions in this year’s conference were categorized in five “tracks,” or institutes, which included the Publishing Systems and Content Management Institute; the Globalization, Localization and Translation Institute; the Sharing Corporate Knowledge Institute; the Information Design and Architecture Institute; and the Web 2.0 Institute. Rather than concentrating my session selections in any one of these tracks, I created my own—what I came to call—the Star Struck Track.

My Star Struck Track featured sessions presented by “famous” people (i.e., “the heavy hitters”) in the field of technical communication. Two of them were people whose books I’ve read as part of our Master of Science in Technical Communication program. I attended a session called Gluing Their Eyes to Your Screen given by Karen Schriver, whose book Dynamics in Document Design was required reading in ENG 517, and I attended a session called Portfolio Management: Developing a Corporate Information Strategy by JoAnn Hackos, whose Managing Your Documentation Projects was used in ENG 518. I also attended a session called An Interview with Jared Spool, facilitated by Carolyn Snyder. Jared has been called “Usability’s bad boy,” and “tends to be one of those people you either love or you hate.”

The big news at the conference from the Society was its update on work being done with the Bureau of Labor Statistics with regards to the Standard Occupational Classification System (SOC) entry for “Technical Writer,” which currently reads: “Write technical materials such as equipment manuals, appendices and maintenance materials.”

The society is working to have the entry renamed as “Technical Communicator” and redefined as: “Develop and design instructional and informational tools needed to assure the safe, appropriate and effective use of science and technology, intellectual property, and manufactured products and services. Combine multimedia knowledge and strong communication skills with technical expertise to educate across the entire spectrum of users’ abilities, technical expertise, and visual and auditory capabilities.”

This work is significant in that it has implications about technical writing being recognized as a profession, which in turn factors into the salary ranges for our work.

I put my leadership skills to work, and I took advantage of the great opportunity to network at the conference by organizing what my flyer billed as a “GLBT OUTING (So to speak!).” GLBT stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender, but all people were invited. The flyer promised: “No orientation verification will be done at the door.”

About 12 people attend, including one STC regional director who thanked me profusely for organizing the event, and where I made new technical writing friends from Florida, Utah, Texas, Minneapolis, and Georgia.

I returned from the conference bursting with pride over our Community of Distinction Award for the 2006-2007 year, and excited and enthused about leading—along with our Co-President Andrew Armstrong—our achieving student community in the 2007-2008 academic year. ♦
Technically Speaking

Fall 2007 Activity Calendar

Aug. 20, 6-7 p.m.
New Student Orientation *(S)(A)
123 Tompkins Hall

Aug. 24, 5:30-6:30 p.m.
Service NC State *(S)
Talley Student Center Ballroom

September 2007, to be scheduled
Student/Faculty Roundtable *(S)(A)

Sept. 12, 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.
Student Organization Fair *(S)(A)
Membership Drive -- The Brickyard

Sept. 13, 5-6 p.m.
STC Meeting & Social —
Faculty Greet *(S)(A)
Brueggers on Hillsborough

October 2007, to be scheduled
PhD Panel Discussion *(S)(A)

Oct. 3, 5-6 p.m.
STC Meeting & Social —
Faculty Greet *(S)(A)
Brueggers on Hillsborough

Oct. 8, time to be determined
Pre-Advising Info Session

* Networking opportunities:
(S) Social
(A) Academic
(P) Professional

Membership Corner

By Michelle Tackabery

Why should you join (or renew your membership in) the STC student community at NC State?


As communicators, we know these concepts have power beyond the characters that make up the words. As technical communicators in the digital age, the power of the network is what we know best. We know that a network is more than the sum of the bits and bytes that enable people to connect, just as messages are more than the words that make up their content.

The STC student community of technical communicators at NC State University is a fragile thing, borne on the collective power of the network it inhabits at any given moment. This year, it depends on you.

As officers, we can have meetings, schedule events, and maybe even win awards. We know we can do these things because we have done them in the past, but we haven’t done them alone — we did them as a community; a network of people with a shared identity. So what does sharing our identity get you?

This year the student community is offering even more exciting events and networking opportunities, including:

• Participation in NC State’s annual Service Raleigh event;

• An educational program about the concentration areas, known as “clusters,” in the Tech Comm program;

• Several student/faculty roundtables, including a panel discussion about the new PhD. Program;

• Training opportunities in valuable tech comm tools like Dreamweaver and Survey Builder;

• And the first annual “Backpacks v. Briefcases” showdown with the Carolina Chapter, a game night networking event.

Belonging to STC also enables you to keep up with your career and stay on top of advances and research in our industry. Your STC membership gives you free access to the STC jobs database, for example; subscriptions to STC’s magazine, Intercom, and Technical Communication, STC’s monthly journal; and discounts on STC conferences, training opportunities, and webinars.

From the editor: Meeting minutes are posted to the STC listserv after each meeting. Contact Sarah Egan Warren for more information about the listserv.

Technically speaking...

Publication policy
All submissions are welcome and should be sent to the editor as a Microsoft Word document.

Reprint policy
You may reprint original material from this newsletter as long as you acknowledge the author and source.

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Technically puzzling...

Back to school by John Martin

Across

1. This semester, ENG675 is not being this
6. PC alternative
8. Suffix to describe a person with a certain set of beliefs
9. Moving in a mechanical way, often rigidly
10. A preposition: subsequent to in time or order
11. Big nickname in 16th-17th century writing
13. One way to gather data (Harris is a big name in this method)
14. MS faculty member (with 2 down)
16. MS faculty member (with 20 across)
18. Sometimes these are boosted needlessly
20. MS faculty member (with 16 across)
24. MS faculty member
25. Alejandro might schedule his classes around these
27. In global businesses, this abbreviation might be used to represent a region (Martha might also have used this as a nickname for her cherry-tree chopping husband)
28. Past and past participle of have
29. Some passwords require at least one of this type of character

Down

1. An adjective: belonging to us
2. MS faculty member (with 14 across)
3. If you wrote it over and over and over, it might become this
4. MS faculty (with 5 down)
5. MS faculty (with 4 down)
6. A teaching or research word: particular ways of doing something
7. MS faculty member
12. You do this with your grievances
14. People who have a wide range of understanding are often said to have this kind of knowledge: a ______
15. Grew through experience
17. Mentally quick and resourceful
19. MS faculty member
21. October 26th is the last day to do this to your schedule with 500+ level courses
22. What you’ll have in the marketplace with your MS in Technical Communication: an ______
23. Dr. Dicks is at the _____ for the MS program and Dr. Miller is at it for the PhD program
26. An editor’s mark: intentionally so written