The goal of it all: Graduation

By John Martin

It’s been barely a month since I graduated from the MS in Technical Communication program, and the answer to a question I’ve already heard a lot—“What’s it feel like?”—is slowly taking shape. What’s been interesting about the gradual development of the answer is that it’s coming from places I’d never imagined it coming from before I graduated.

I was sitting in a local coffee shop the other day, and I looked up to see a gentleman sitting on a stool by the window with the cover of his book facing me: *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*.

My first thought was, “Hmmmm, I’ve never heard of that book, but the title is interesting.” And then the thought of a graduate popped into my head: “Hey, I can read that if I want to. I have time to read anything I want to for pleasure now!”

During this past semester, particularly during the last half, while never quite “catching up” after missing classes for a week for my birthday trip to Australia, I completely stopped exercising at Carmichael.

What it feels like to be graduated is to realize that when the gym reopens after the holidays, I won’t be able to use it for free as a student any more.

Fortunately though, I learned that NCSU alumni can join, for a fee understandably, but you can only join with that kind of membership in the summer—“after graduation.” *Hey, what about those of us graduating in December?*

I’m only going to be working three days a week at IBM for all of

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**Farewell and Welcome**

Three students recently graduated from the technical communication program: Milton Hawes, John Martin and Jason Winter. With the new spring semester, the program welcomes John Grishin, Amanda Herbin, Sam Kadwell, LaKrisha Mauldin, Jamie McQuiggen, Justin Moss, Todd Pendergast, and Gowri Saraf.
The President’s Pen

New year, new president

By Andrew Armstrong

I’m greatly looking forward to working with the STC officers and the rest of our student community. Brian Swiger, our secretary last semester, is our new co-president. Andrew Jones is taking over as secretary this semester. I’ve known Andrew since I became a student in the MS program, and I’m very pleased to have him as an officer.

As most of you know, John Martin, our community’s president last semester, graduated in December. John was, in many ways, the heart and soul of the NSCU student community. I want to congratulate him on earning his master’s in technical communication and wish him the absolute best as he transitions into life after graduate school. He’s left an indelible mark on our student community and will be sorely missed. Thank you, John.

We have several new students starting in the MS program this semester. On behalf of the STC, I’d like to welcome you and encourage you to consider joining our student community.

Among the events we have planned are a faculty meet-and-greet, a roundtable discussion about an emerging topic in the technical communication field, and participation in the annual community service event Service Raleigh. Please take a look at the activities calendar (page 7) and see what else is in store this semester and take the opportunity to become active in our community.

Your Technically Speaking

By John Strange

I became editor of Technically Speaking last year kind of by accident.

I had taken only one graduate course (part of a course, anyway), when I saw the listserv message that the NC State chapter of the STC needed a newsletter editor. I volunteered to help out where needed. What better way to learn more about the program?

Within a few months, to my surprise, I was named editor.

I’ve learned a lot about technical communication and Technically Speaking in the months since then, but not as much as I did by taking ENG512 (Research and Theory in Professional Writing), when I examined seven years of Technically Speaking in a research project that combined discourse analysis and the study of the academic technical communication newsletter as a genre.

I discovered that Technically Speaking and other similar publications offer their readers four major components: news, community-building and entertainment, education, and professional or academic writing. “News” is perhaps self-explanatory: features (such as last issue’s profile of Brent Faber) calendar items, and such. Community-building
Redefinition: Who is the technical communicator?

By John Martin

The definition of “technical writer” or “technical communicator” has long been a moving target, with technical communication crossing into various professional and academic fields. The Society of Technical Communication, together with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is trying to nail down the target with a new job description.

The current job description listed in the Standard Occupational Classification System of the BLS, is as follows:

Technical Writer
“Write technical materials, such as equipment manuals, appendices, or operating and maintenance instructions. May assist in layout work.”

The BLS developed the SOC System to implement standard classifications that would help companies set salary scales and job descriptions and would help federal agencies collect and compare occupational data. Obviously, the job description listed in SOC System is crucial to technical communicators everywhere.

The STC is working with the BLS to both rename the entry and redefine it as follows:

Technical Communicator
“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....”

On November 28, 2007, the NC State STC community’s Fall Student/Faculty Roundtable reviewed the new job description, and especially considered five questions:

1. Overall, what do you think about the new definition? What implications does it have?
2. Do any of the elements included in it surprise you? Why or why not?
3. What areas in the new definition do you think have corresponding classes in our MS or PhD programs in which to gain knowledge or experience?
4. Is there anything you’d take out of the new definition?
5. What’s missing that you might add, if anything?

Most participants were at least a little concerned about the lack of conciseness in the new description. I ran the new definition against the SMOG (Simple Measure Of Gobbledygook) Readability Indicator, and measured a grade of 21.17. The top of the scale is the “19+” range, which is described as needing a graduate degree to understand. An example of a document with the same level of difficulty is the IRS Code.

Overall, however, participants agreed that the new description did a decent job of being specific enough to illuminate the depth and breadth of what we contribute as technical communicators, while being broad enough to encompass many job titles under its domain.

A new student/faculty roundtable is expected to be held during the spring semester. Time and place are still to be determined, and all are welcome to participate.
**Job market**

Employment opportunity information for MS in Technical Communication students is disseminated through the etc listerv, 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.

**Book Review**

**What Writing Does & How It Does It**

By Robin Wienke

In *What Writing Does and How It Does It*, the authors collectively address a diverse group of newcomers to the technical communication discourse community, and present to them expertly packaged tools for establishing roles and investigating meanings within the field through discourse analyses of particular texts and text-making.

As the title suggests, the collection of essays is organized into two sections: the first focusing on analyses of texts as end products, the second focusing on analyses of processes used in constructing texts. Bazerman and Prior express their goals in the book’s introduction for researchers to extend discourse analysis beyond the search for meaning to the questions of “what texts do and how texts mean” (p. 3).

Providing a brief history of the field of discourse analysis and its shift from analysis of spoken language to that of text, and from analysis of product to that of process, the editors introduce the wealth of research opportunities emerging within the field, while simultaneously framing the context of the book’s structure as building upon valuable historical practices to evolve towards new goals and practices in the field.

Citing what they intend will become four unique differences from other introductions to discourse analysis (coverage of writing as well as text, value to teachers of writing, breadth and diversity of traditions presented, and focus on introducing methods of analysis), Bazerman and Prior situate the book as a sampling of “approaches to analyzing texts,” where each of the 11 chapters represents one of these approaches in a systematic way (pp. 5-6).

Each author follows the same framework, starting by introducing the approach, using examples familiar to the reader, presenting applied analyses, and finally concluding and providing relevant activities and further readings.

Newcomers to research in discourse analysis, such as graduate students or researchers in related/overlapping fields (i.e. composition, linguistics), are likely to find this structure extremely useful in identifying and framing research topics, as it provides an efficient insight into a type of research and then guides the reader to additional resources that can be exploited if a particular approach is found to be intriguing.

Two patterns emerge across the collection: the need for a combination of deductive and inductive methods to structure discourse analysis, and the emergent function of discourse as the use of texts to accomplish things. Crediting the “dynamic, flexible, and changing” nature of “texts, text-making practices, and contexts” to the wide variety of forces affecting

Huckin opens in Part I of the collection, in his chapter, “Content Analysis, What Texts Talk About,” with an insight into the variety in “distribution and sequencing” of quantitative versus qualitative data-gathering methods in analyzing content of different texts (p. 16).

Likewise, “some may start with a proposition and use data-gathering in a deductive manner to confirm or disconfirm the proposition, whereas others may be more exploratory, using analysis in an inductive, flexible manner” (p. 16). The need for this dual method of deductive/inductive research is reinforced by Kamberelis and de la Luna in their chapter on children’s writing, where they describe inductive analysis as searching out “macro” patterns that “characterize writing practices, contexts, and politics,” and then juxtapose it with discourse analysis (data-gathering, deductive analysis), as a means to examine “micro” patterns which “index and sustain recurrent macro patterns” (p. 252).

Kamberelis and de la Luna, and Prior, in his chapter, “Tracing Process: How Texts Come into Being,” justify the need for this type of analysis in the ways they describe texts and writing as multi-faceted and unpredictable (pp. 246, 171). Prior recognizes the need to be “aware of the different senses” of understanding a text (p. 169).

Continued, page 5
them, Kamberelis and de la Luna point logically to a need for research methods that view problems from multiple angles (p. 246). In her chapter on second language writing, Buell describes the need to interview the writer about assumptions made from analysis of the written text to test those assumptions and to allow new insight to emerge (p. 117).

These descriptions of richness and volatility also serve as words of caution, indicating that the diverse inherent nature of the subjects under study naturally create new problems and limitations as research unfolds, and create results open to interpretation within a variety of contexts and timepoints. Leander and Prior, in their chapter, “Speaking and Writing: How Talk and Text Interact,” discuss the limitations of capturing all the factors involved in speaking and writing, despite technological advances (p. 202).

Selzer, in his chapter, “Rhetorical Analysis: Understanding How Texts Persuade Readers,” asks the reader to “remember the limitations of your analysis; realize that your analysis will always be somewhat partial and incomplete, ready to be deepened, corrected, modified, and extended by the insights of others” (pp. 302-303).

These words of caution may serve to temper any overly lofty aspirations of newcomers to discourse analysis who may be seeking out a single, all-encompassing meaning or answer to a research question.

The second pattern evident across the chapters, the idea of functional use of texts to accomplish things, may be separated into four subcategories: use of text to construct an argument, use of text to shape personal identity, use of text to shape students’ learning techniques, and use of text to shape the ideology of the field of technical communication (or information architecture).

Eubanks (poetics and narrativity), Bazerman (inter-textuality), and Selzer (rhetorical analysis), each suggest that a possible functional use of texts is strategic discursive positioning in order to construct a persuasive argument. Eubanks, for example, presents Bill Gates and how he uses story-telling and metaphors in interviews responding to a federal antitrust suit both to persuade the media that he and Microsoft share an interchangeable identity, obscuring which party is accountable for any misdeeds, and to portray himself/ Microsoft as a game-player rather than the war-wager his opposition indicates (Chapter 2).

Just as Buell describes, in Chapter 5, how second language students borrow from one cultural discourse to attempt to make meaning in another, Kamberelis and de la Luna describe, in Chapter 9, a similar phenomenon of children “construct[ing] texts that are ‘like’ the texts they perceive to be common currency within” the activity systems to which they are peripheral (p. 245). Barton looks at rich features, in her chapter on linguistic discourse analysis, to compare the written texts of “experienced” and “inexperienced” writers (p. 67).

Bazerman and Prior stated in the introduction their desire that the collection of essays would have “particular value to teachers” (p. 5). This motive is reinforced by Prior in Chapter 7, as they encourage research in discourse analysis because of its ability to reveal new methods of exploiting the ways people interact with and create texts.

Prior emphasizes the influence that teachers already have on their students writing, their “key roles in the production of text through initiating and motivating it (the type of text to write, the length, what kinds of sources to use, the timing of the process), and often contributing to content” (pp. 170-171). Through an analysis of sixth-graders learning about Mayan culture through a learning unit which integrated math, language arts, and video production, Bazerman demonstrates how the “teacher’s practical understanding of the complex interrelated activities” was key in providing the students an opportunity to learn complex and varied information through “varied forms of cognition and learning” (p.336).

In representing how emerging technologies have led to new methods of creating texts and studying what texts do and how they do it, Wysocki, in Chapter 6, “The Multiple Media of Texts,” raises the issue of the role of discourse analysts in formulating research questions that could distinctly shape the ideological tenets of the field of technical communication.

and entertainment would be covered by the crossword puzzle, but also by our invitations to you to join the STC, biographies of and reflections by officers, and so on.

Articles count as educational if they deal with training, or a non-academic reflection on technical communication. An article is academic or professional writing if it could appear in an academic journal or other professional publication—a book or software review, for example. It’s the kind of writing we are being trained to do in graduate school.

My research found that seven years of *Technically Speaking* presented only a few examples of the professional writing being taught in the NC State technical communication graduate program. There is a clear and strong preference for articles that meet a social, community-building function. Of the 219 articles counted, 119, or 54 percent, were classified as community-building. Forty-nine articles, or 22 percent, were classified as news; 28, or 12.7 percent were classified as educational; and only 19 articles out of 219, or 8.67 percent, were deemed to be academic or professional writing.

And that’s fine and good, because for the most part, we want *Technically Speaking* to fit the needs of our community. The program at NC State is designed for mostly part-time students who are working fulltime, dealing with families and other issues, and who rarely see each other than during class. Therefore, one would expect that editors would naturally gravitate toward writing that reaches out socially through expressive, personal, friendly language.

On the other hand, the faculty at Minnesota State University use the online newsletter *Techniques* as a lab and proving ground in their pedagogy, thus one would expect to find reviewed and approved professional writing within the newsletter. There is very little social commentary or entertainment content in *Techniques*.

So the question for you, the reader, is where is the best balance? An excellent reading assignment in ENG512 depicts the technical communication graduate student as a “legitimate peripheral participant,” the cognitive apprentice learning the registers and conventions of professional writing and testing the boundaries of academic and professional discourse. Perhaps *Technically Speaking* should be presenting a model for such discourse.

So this is where you, the reader, come in. So far, *Technically Speaking* has been one-way communication—all send, no receive. I hope that people are reading this, but I can’t really be sure.

What do you — the academic, technical communication community — want from *Technically Speaking*? Where do we meet your needs, and where do we fail?

Please take a moment now to write me at jestrang@ncsu.edu. *Technically Speaking* should be all about what the reader needs, but we won’t know if you don’t tell us.

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**Graduation, continued from page 1**

2008. Being graduated feels like I might actually have time to get to some of the 30 items on my 2008 to-do list, some of which are items I’ve been putting off for the four years I’ve been in the program:

Replace a couple of windows in my town home, and all my faucets.

Go through my bookcase and school papers and *toss!*

Play the stock market again.

Get back to work on the book I’m writing.

Update my home page and professional portfolio.

Write articles for *Technically Speaking*... (see pages 1 and 3).

Visit the people I love in my life more often now.

Being able to tend to all those things... *that’s* what it feels like to be graduated.

John Martin is a Fall ’07 graduate of the MS in Technical Communication program, and a past president of the NCSU student community of the Society for Technical Communication.
Spring 2008 Activity Calendar

January 2008
Meet & Greet (Members, faculty, and new students). Date and place to be determined. *(S)(A)

Webinar: SurveyBuilder, Jan. 29. Place to be determined. *(P)

February
STC Meeting & Social–Faculty Greet, Feb. 5. Place to be determined. *(S)(A)

Games Night: Backpacks vs. Briefcases with the STC Carolina Chapter. Time and place to be determined. *(P)(S)

March
Student/Faculty Roundtable. Time and place to be determined. *(S)(A)

Webinar: Dreamweaver. Time and place to be determined. *(P)

April
Service Raleigh. Time and place to be determined. *(S)

Election of Officers for 2008-2009 Academic Year

* 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.

This semester the student community is continuing to offer 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;
- 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...

Geek City, by John Strange

ACROSS

8 The original bionic man (2 words)
9 Expensive metal; also the "girl" Metal Man
11 Luke, ich bin dein ______.
13 Batman butler
15 Movie hero or U.S. state
20 The color of will power in DC Comics
21 Potter creator
22 Superman's first name on Krypton
24 Pesky teddies from 25 Down
26 Time-traveling Hero
27 This is the first word, upper left, of your Google screen
30 Ratchet and ______ (Playstation game)
31 World of _________.
32 Indestructable cheerleader
34 Über-geek (movies)
35 She's the Slayer
36 He was Captain America (2 words)
37 Über-geek (tech gadgets)

DOWN

1 Creator of The Matrix
2 Actor AKA Neo
3 He played the first Starbuck
4 Starfleet's crown jewel
5 In French, he'd be Araignee-Homme
6 Kirk's middle name
7 TV's Robin (2 words)
10 The last letter of the Greek alphabet.
12 Greek god
14 Video game combining Disney and Final Fantasy (2 words)
16 Crouching Tiger, Hidden ______.
17 Another Lee (martial arts)
18 Shyamalan comic book movie
19 One of the first portable music players
23 She plays Starbuck
25 Best movie franchise in the history of the universe (2 words)
28 Google button: "I'm Feeling _______"
29 Lee (comics) or Dicks (NC State Tech Comm)
30 Battlestar Galactica villains
33 Microsoft's iPod wannabe