Tech Comm student rolls with the girls

By John Strange

Sometimes the best thing for the body and soul after turning in a major research paper or project notebook is to go to the track, skate around as fast as you can, and knock a few people down.

It certainly works for Nancy Hulbert, technical communication graduate student at NCSU and a roller derby athlete. She is a member of the Debutante Brawlers, a team in the Carolina Rollergirls league.

“Skating makes me feel better,” she says. “It’s good exercise, and at the end of a practice or scrimmage, there’s not a stressful thought left in your mind.”

Hulbert is a “newbie” in roller derby, a relative newcomer to a sport that is catching fire around the country. She had been a volunteer and done some speed practice in Rollergirls for some time, but it was only after seeing a bout in Tucson, Arizona, at the time the second best team in the country, that she decided to commit more time to roller derby.

She left the track impressed, and knowing one thing for sure: “I have to go home and learn how to do that. I don’t care how, but I have to do that now.” She was at tryouts in July and offered a spot in the league.

After months of skating practice and skills assessments, she took her first scrimmage in October.

For the second year in a row, the NC State student community of the STC has been recognized as the top student chapter with the Community of Distinction award.

The incoming and outgoing co-presidents, John Strange and Andrew Armstrong, respectively, will accept the award at the annual international STC Conference Awards banquet in June.

“It is because of the hard work of our officers and the willingness of our members to participate that we can achieve the highest possible

NC State STC Community repeats Distinction

Continued, page 6

I N S I D E

President’s farewell 2
Job interview skills 3
On mobile content 4
Book review 5
Game night 8

Send submissions to the editor, John Strange, at jestrang@ncsu.edu.

www.ncsu.edu/stud_orgs/stc
Looking back on my last semester as co-president, I’m proud of what our student community was able to accomplish. It’s been a hectic spring for all of us, but we managed to put together some noteworthy events and have a great deal of fun.

In February, we had a great turn-out the first official STC NCSU Community Game Night Throwdown. Thank you to Jen Riehle and Christin Phelps for putting in all the hard work for a very fun event.

In March, we held another Student-Faculty Roundtable where we discussed the evolving role of technical communicators in the “Web 2.0 world.”

Also in March, we partnered with DELTA to host a SurveyBuilder webinar. SurveyBuilder is a tool for creating, customizing, and administering online surveys. Anyone who’s interested can access the recorded session on our website.

In April, we were fortunate to have Ronnie Duncan, president of Timely Text (www.timelytext.com), give an excellent presentation on the DO’s and DON’Ts of interviewing for professionals writing jobs. In attendance were students’ from Dr. Dicks’ course, ENG 508: Usability Studies for Technical Communicators, as well as other members of the NCSU Community. Thank you again, Dr. Dicks for organizing this event.

We also held elections for STC Officers for the 2008-09 Academic Year. Brian Swiger and John Strange will be serving as co-presidents, with Jen Riehle, our VP/Webmaster, and Christin Phelps, our Treasurer both continuing their leadership roles.

I’m very happy to announce there will be some new officers next year as well. Anne Roth will be taking over as Membership Manager, John Williams is taking charge of Technically Speaking, and Sandy Bjorkback will be your new Secretary. As an added bonus, Rebecca O’Connell will assume the newly-created position of Activities Coordinator.

I wish you all the best of luck. I’m certain our student community will continue to thrive under your leadership.

I also want to congratulate everyone who survived the capstone course as well as all the new graduates!

And, of course, a special thank you to our faculty advisor, Sarah Egan Warren. It’s been a wonderful experience and one that I will sorely miss… ♦
Time to ‘level the playing field’ for job hunters

By John Strange

Ronnie Duncan, president of Timely Text, a Triangle area job placement and recruitment agency for technical communicators, says it’s time to “level the playing field” in the job market.

In a recent presentation to technical communication graduate students at NC State, Duncan said that technical communicators often do not understand good interview techniques.

“They have excellent talent, but they give horrible interviews,” he said.

Technical communicators may feel honestly ambivalent about a position they’re interviewing for, he said. After all, most job seekers cannot be 100 percent positive they want the position until after they interview and they can have time to consider any offers.

But that attitude will not work in the interview room, Duncan said.

“You are selling yourself,” he said. “You need to be truthful: I’m selling myself. Don’t come across as ambivalent as underlying theme. You will never get an offer.

“Interviewers can smell ambivalence a mile away,” he said. “You can’t say no until they say yes. It is a dance. It is a courtship.”

More of Duncan’s advice for job interviews:

• Arrive 15 minutes early, and sit in the car to prepare yourself.
• Sit and the car and tell yourself, “I am going to get this.”
• “Dress to impress,” regardless of the venue. Maybe Red Hat has the reputation for being a place where suits don’t fit in, but you will still be judged by how you dress for an interview, Duncan said. “The first impression of you is very important.”
• Check your teeth and have good breath. Pop a mint.
• Smile. Look the interviewer in the eye, and repeat your name at the handshake.
• Don’t sit in a crouch.
• Put down your notes and lean in.

“An interview is a two-way dialogue. Your questions should be more about your interest and more about the homework you have done than anything you can say,” Duncan said.

Congratulations graduates!

The NC State student community of the Society for Technical Communication offers congratulations and best wishes for the 10 spring 2008 graduates of the technical communication master’s program:

Andrew Armstrong, Alex Bass, Jennifer Frye Gentry, Lindsay Hite, Andrew Jones, Michelle Kidd Tackaberry, Jeremy Miller, Andrew Stout, Tyler Williamson and Nathan Wolf.

We hope you will join the Carolina chapter of the STC, and keep in touch with us here at NC State. Remember us especially on Aug. 20, the first day of classes!

Distinction, continued from page 1

STC honor,” said Sarah Egan Warren, faculty adviser to the community and assistant director of the Professional Writing Program at NC State.

“I know how much hard work and passion it takes to be amongst the very best of the best, and you and your chapter members did it!” wrote STC President Linda L. Oestreich to the community. “Winning this award shows that your chapter is strong, vibrant, and innovative. And, basically, you understand what it takes to provide member value. Please extend my best wishes and appreciation to all who had a part in making NCSU a stellar performer for this year.”

Cindy Currie, STC second vice president and STC Community Advocacy Lead, wrote, “Student communities like NCSU represent the best of what STC has to offer in so many ways for students of technical communication. Bravo NCSU! You are truly a shining star!”
Technical Communication and developing usable mobile content

By Andrew Jones

The mobile Internet presents a challenge for technical communicators. At the intersection of user demand, technology, and usability, the mobile web is emerging as a troubled medium with great potential.

More often than not, specific problems with mobile content usability can be conflated into two root issues: device size and user context. Size is a problem because mobile devices function as computers, but are reduced to less than a quarter of the size of their desktop counterparts. User context is challenging because mobile usage is dynamic, and it defies permanence of place, network, and external influences.

Information developers of all kinds, including technical communicators, have worked comfortably in the past with the understanding similar to Charles Bazerman’s assertion: “information is available only as it is made.”¹ We usually rely on static conditions of information delivery, such as genre and focused user attention, to facilitate user comprehension. Mobile communication is different – it’s a moving target in a world full of distractions.

Compared to its printed and large-screen predecessors, mobile content is a new information frontier. Technical communicators should be attuned to the opportunities and development approaches the mobile web presents.

In many ways, mobile technology acceptance has outpaced mobile information development and delivery. The problems of size and context have not prevented the widespread adoption of mobile devices, but they have hindered the capabilities and acceptance of mobile content. Those of us who have used a mobile device to access the Internet understands the dearth of mobile-compatible web sites, but we also find the benefits of the mobile web irresistible.

The high-level advantages of the Internet on mobile devices², referenced here as they originated from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), are easily conceived from a technical communication perspective.

Internet-enabled mobile devices, including, but not limited to, cellular phones, smart phones, and PDAs, combine seven primary user benefits. In most of the categorical advantages listed here, these seven benefits are unique to the mobile communication platform:

- **Personal** – A mobile device is often perceived by its user as an extension of the user.

- **Personalizable** – The customization of a mobile device and the content it accesses enhances overall usability.

- **Portable** – Most mobile users keep their devices on their person, whether in a pocket, backpack or handbag.

- **Connected** – The vast majority of mobile devices manufactured in the last few years are connected to communications networks (e.g. cellular, Wi-Fi or Bluetooth).

- **Location awareness** – Because of their connectivity, mobile devices are capable of location awareness. Available content and services can be tailored to the user’s geographic location.

- **One-handed operation** – A mobile device can be used with one hand, and is therefore conducive to use in motion or during user activities.

- **Always on** – A mobile device can be a reliable tool for a variety of purposes at any time of day.

So, the user has access to information where and when she needs it most. Put another way, a user can have the web in his pocket and use it as a resource for

---

Mobile content, continued from page 4

completing tasks and achieving goals. It is the latter classification of this mobile information dichotomy that will significantly impact the field of technical communication as mobile communication media matures.

10 Overarching Principles of Mobile Content Design

As with web development for large-screen delivery, there are few universal mandates for good content design. Detailed recommendations for creating interfaces, information architecture, mobile content, XHTML and CSS can be found in standard organization publications, design blogs and other web resources. The following high-level principles were gleaned from a variety of sources, and may be helpful in planning and executing mobile content development.

Currently, mobile devices are all about the consumption of information, whereas desktop and laptop computers are also designed for the creation of information. Mobile users are constantly aware of the passage of time; the occurrences in the world around them and the brevity of mobile communications are constant reminders.

Users don’t read mobile content, they scan it.

Content optimized for mobile communications devices should either avoid or alleviate composition burden on the user.

Minimize design elements wherever possible (e.g. more efficient markup, minimum image sizes, number of clicks in a stream, or other aspects of development).

Target your design to the user’s device and available network whenever and wherever possible.

Use typography to inform the user of information hierarchy and importance.

Real estate is precious. Optional, granular navigation should never be used in space that could be devoted to content.

Context continuity is a primary goal. Provide user feedback, separate content from controls, and be consistent.

Notes:


2007. She broke her finger in that first scrimmage, and the break needed surgery. The finger is since healed, and she was in her first competitive bout April 20.

“It was embarrassing,” she laughs. “I went to hit another blocker and totally left the track open for the opposing jammer to scoot through and score. Yeah, that was a really bad move.”

In high school, Hulbert was an active figure skater until she injured her knee. Roller derby allows her to return to skating, although the skills used in each activity are like the difference between writing poetry and writing a software manual.

On the ice, she explains, one uses “big, smooth strokes” to glide. In roller derby, skaters most often use strokes that are jerking and short, like “hopping around on skates.”

One more big difference: “You don’t hit people in figure skating.”

The rules of roller derby are a technical writer’s dream job, with a complicated system of points and penalties. Several referees keep track of the action and the penalties from the center of the track.

In the most basic of terms, each team’s jammer must break through the pack, which is made up of members of both teams, before the other jammer.

Hulbert plays the “Blocker 1” position, blocking the opposing team jammer and pushing opposing blockers out of the way to make holes for her own jammer.

“Derby is an offensive and defensive game at the same time,” Hulbert says. “You have so much to pay attention to if you’re going to make the right decisions. I still have so much to learn.”

Roller derby is a unique combination of legitimate sport and camp. Watch a bout and you know these skaters are quick and agile athletes, but many of the skaters dress up in fishnet stockings, makeup, and garish colors for the bout. Every skater boasts a “derby name” on the track. Often she is known by spectators, opponents and teammates alike only by her derby name.

“There’s a definite genre to derby names,” said Hulbert. “The best ones have that ‘smack your head’ quality, not quite a pun, but….”

For example, on the rink she is Bleedin’ Elle. (Say it with a Cockney accent to get the wordplay.) One of her favorite derby names is “Eva Lye,” one of the Debutante Brawlers’ coaches. (Say it fast out loud.) Other Debutant Brawlers include Faye Tallity, Deviled Legs, and Shirley Temper.

“I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about the genre of derby names,” Hulbert says. There is even a national registry of derby names. No duplicates are allowed, and names that are similar to others need the original skater’s permission.

“I love the fact that derby is so different in that way from other sports. It’s unconventional, and it’s fun,” Hulbert says. “And it’s very accepting of people expressing their individuality, often very empatically.

“I love derby, and I love my derby friends. Derby is full of these really strong women. They’re really good friends.”

Hulbert balances roller derby with freelance work, a full-time load at NC State, and a full-time role as a single mom to Gabriel, 8.

“Doing it by yourself is hard,” she says. “It’s one thing to look at from a distance. Another thing doing it. This is really hard.”

But roller derby helps. “We take care of each other.” For example, some women babysit for other skaters who have to put in a required practice session. Several of Hulbert’s teammates helped out as she recovered from hand surgery.

The Carolina Rollergirls’ All-Star Team is ranked third in the national Women’s Flat Track Derby Association. “All-Star players are on a level that’s totally different from the level that the newbies play on,” Hulbert said. “Nearly all of us hope some day to get to play on the All-Star team. Realistically, I have a very long way to go before I’m even close to that kind of skill level.

“But I’m going to try.”

For more information on the Carolina Rollergirls, see www.carolinarollergrils.com.
in their introduction, “the narrative turn” has been given a lowly status in the field for “dumbing down” the discourse (p. 16), favoring the subjective and emotional over the objective and factual (p. 15), and turning away from Western tradition of “privileging logic and science” (p. 12).

But Perkins and Blyler, along with their small group of essayists, are clearly in narrative’s corner. They caution against dismissing the narrative so easily because storytelling and narrative cues carry great benefits for the reader, writer and the field of professional communication.

Perkins puts it well in her individual essay, “Narrative, Rhetoric and Lives”: “Narrative has the potential to put lives into our research and, therefore, our knowing and our teaching.” When narrative is dismissed, “researchers and their readers miss out on a level of detail that will potentially engage, delight, and stimulate thinking” (p. 63).

Simply put, narrative involves the reader, engages the imagination, and places humanity and the human story directly into the discourse. As such, say Perkins and Blyler, using narrative can help connect academic and professional communicators with the broader interdisciplinary community, a community that has not lost touch with subjectivity and the narrative (p. 20). Furthermore, the narrative turn allows teachers and other professionals to better “refocus their pedagogy on professional communication as knowledge-making” (p. 22), engaging and energizing the classroom with human stories and relationships.

Indeed, Perkins and Blyler conclude their introduction by predicting that “10 years in the future,” there will be “burgeoning of interest in narrative, as … workplace professionals are freed to recognize narrative’s considerable strengths” (p. 28).

The authors have a year or two to write their follow-up and check on their predictions, but a quick check of current materials do not yet reveal a “burgeoning” interest. A search at the Amazon.com online bookseller for “narrative professional communication” reveals a Technical Communication article and Perkins and Blyler’s book as first and second references among a only a small handful of other books and articles published after Perkins and Blyler’s work. A journal search through at the EBSCOHost Research Databases, available through NC State University libraries, shows only four articles with “narrative” in the title in various technical communication journals.

If interest in the narrative within the professional communication field has not grown since 1999, one can hardly blame Perkins and Blyler. Their selection of essays – broken into six different sections covering such diverse topics as science writing, managerial communication, and health care – show clearly that storytelling should be, and often is, a useful and major component in various discourse communities.

It’s interesting though that the essays taken together offer no narrative flow or story. One follows the other almost arbitrarily, even though the essays are grouped in small sections.

Borrowing from the earth sciences, they resemble a field of interesting rocks left behind by a retreating glacier. To the casual eye, the rocks are obviously related to each other, but not necessarily connected.

They are all interesting, but there are some emeralds in this book of essays, polished clean and green by the ice and pebbles. These pieces are beautifully shaped and polished, clear and concise, showing the way for writers to improving the discourse by taking the narrative turn. ♦

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.
Game Night

Technical communication students and professionals gathered in the Caldwell Hall lounge the night of Feb. 22 to share a meal and play games. Lots of games.

The “Throwdown” was an opportunity for student and professional STC’ers to get to know each other while playing Nintendo Wii, cards and classic board games such as Pictionary.

Students and professionals played for points into the night. The students won. Handily.

Watch for a rematch in 2009. ♦

Student Leigh Samuel hopes her teammates can make sense of her “technical drawing” during Pictionary. (Photos by John Strange)

John Martin, immediate past president of the STC student community at NC State, and a recent graduate, receives a special Throw Down surprise: The STC’s Distinguished Service Award for Students. Making the presentation is Sarah Egan Warren, faculty adviser for the STC student community.

Brien and Robin Wienke try their hands at a Nintendo Wii with Sarah Egan Warren. Robin is a student in the technical communication program.

Maryellen Smith, a graduate of the technical communication program, doesn’t seem quite sure about what to draw next during Pictionary.