Welcome to the first edition of *Technically Speaking* for the Spring 2009 semester. Most of us have already started the semester. Some of us will begin soon. Some of us are just starting the program, while some of us are preparing for the final step towards the hard-earned MS in Technical Communications. I am referring to English 675, generally the final component in one’s work in the MS program. I am taking it this semester and I am quite excited about it.

ENG 675 is the capstone course that we each have to take before we are granted our master’s degrees. It is the culmination of all of the work completed in the course of the program. In essence, 675 is a final statement of what we have learned. For some of us, it offers a first chance to engage in a project of our choosing, solely focused on what we find most important. For others, it can become a statement of one’s potential; aimed at doctoral admissions committees that we are capable of doing high-level academic work. For all of us, it offers a chance to do a true, focused independent project that is informed by the great body of knowledge we have attained in our tenures here at NC State.

I refer to this because there are 10 individuals taking ENG675 this semester. The individual projects look to span the broad spectrum of Technical Communication. Starting in the middle of April, everyone else will have a chance to sit in on the 675 defenses. For those who are just beginning the program or who plan to take 675 in Spring of 2010 (you can only take it in the Spring semester), I encourage you to reserve each Monday and Wednesday in late April and early May for attendance at any number of these events that you can attend. First, you will have an opportunity to see what lies in your future, from the standpoint of expectations. Second, you will get to see the results of the hard work of your peers. Finally, you will get a glimpse into the broad world of technical education and the research that will inform the field as we move forward into the future.

I will close with a plea to join STC if you have not already done so. Nothing is more important to the aspiring and practicing communicator. It is the cool thing to do, you know... If you are already a member, make sure you have paid your dues. It is that time of year.

Inside these pages, Ann Roth Strickland demonstrates the type of superior preparation one can expect to gain, as she shares a grounding exercise from a course with Dr. Brent Faber. It is a good example of some of the work done by students in the MS program.

We also present a continuation of the new series “5 Questions.” This issue features Clay Spinuzzi kindly taking the time to answer a few of my questions. Also in this issue, you will find information about joining and renewing your membership in STC. We also have some events planned and you will find more information in future issues of this newsletter or at the NCSU-STC web site.

Cheers-John
Of course I recognized the history of Election Day, Nov. 4, so on Nov. 5 I downloaded and saved the html files from the day’s New York Times and Washington Post. For good measure I printed some stories and tucked them away in a folder for my great-grandchildren to look at when I’m old and gray and smell funny.

It just so happens that on that same day, Nov. 5, tens of thousands were also thinking of preserving the history of the moment. Newspapers around the country sold out quickly; people lined up at the headquarters of the Times, Post and others to buy Election Day editions; many copies were up for bid on eBay.

Question: Which is the better artifact? Which would you rather have in 30 years, an old, brown newspaper, or my digital, good-as-the-day-I-saved-them html files? (For the record, I didn’t really save the files, so if you want them in 30 years, I hope you saved them.)

If you answered “the newspaper,” as I’m sure most of us have, what does this mean to us as technical communicators? What role does technology play in the narrative of our history? As newspapers decline before our eyes with failing circulation and advertising revenues, does communication technology have what it takes to replace newspapers as historical touchstones? Should we even care?

When the Boston Red Sox finally won the World Series in 2004, a day my grandfathers died regretting they would never see, I asked my mother in New Hampshire to save The Boston Globe for me, even though I devoured the news stories at the Globe’s website the day after the big win. (She sent me the Globe, The Boston Herald and two New Hampshire newspapers, and they are tucked away safely in a file cabinet.) The online news story texts and photos filled an immediate need for me, but the real newspapers touched a deeper more permanent – more real – desire to have a memento that I could hold and read and smell and put away.

It’s interesting that we don’t seem to have similar concerns or needs when we look at other areas of technology. From the success of digital music downloads, apparently we don’t really need to have the CD and its packaging in the hand to enjoy music. You can enjoy your digital pictures on the screen, present them as a slide show on a digital frame or television, or print them if you wish. But I imagine the market for the massive photo album is shrinking fast.

The Washington Post’s Rob Pegoraro considered the same questions recently in his technology blog, Faster Forward.

“How do you memorialize an exuberant comments thread on a blog post or a series of ecstatic Facebook status updates when those pages could move or disappear? Does a Flickr gallery of screenshots of newspaper home pages from the night of November 4th pack the same emotional wallop as a single copy of the paper that landed on your front porch the next day? In short, how do you make something permanent in a medium built on constant change? For me, the only answer to come to mind is ‘print out and frame a screen capture.’ What about you? How do you extract a memento from the online world?”

Care to comment? Write me at jestrang@ncsu.edu, or comment at our blog, writetech.org.

**NCSU STC – Be a member.**

Join our Community of Distinction – Get involved.

The Student Chapter of the STC gives you a sounding board – and resources specific to our collective professions, like Publications Search, Salary Database, and a Jobs Database.

No one “gets it” quite like other Technical Communicators. Don’t forget to renew … Your membership expires December 2008.

Questions? Contact Membership Manager Anne Roth Strickland at arothstrickland@gmail.com or log on and renew at www.stc.org

Stay a member.
As he introduces the Street Life Project, Whyte carefully mentions his finding that city streets are more popular playspaces than many playgrounds—especially in high-density blocks, where you would expect traffic to be heavier. Going on to describe the vantage point the stoops provide the children’s caregivers and the open space the street provides for play, Whyte hints at the rhyme and reason to this anomaly. After all, why would children prefer to play in the street than at the playground? Turns out the answers can be found through a combination of human psychology, intrinsic behavior, and social behavior and discourse study.

As he transitions into plazas, sitting spaces, and effective capacity, Whyte begins to comment on the psychology and social discourse of the spaces. He walks the reader through each space, touching on the reasons why spaces the spaces were introduced to the city (primarily through building incentives), how they are used, and who uses them. He finds that the majority of his demographic are commuters—the rest depends on the design of the space.

1: People generally travel in groups. Similar to the notion that animals and even early nomadic cultures traveled and fared better in packs. Even if they aren’t seen interacting with each other, Whyte’s research shows that people attract people, and that they travel together.

2: The more groups that exist in a space, the more people (solo or groups of) will join the space. Again, finding that people attract people, and even though may prove more interesting to eat your lunch and people watch as part of a large group, there is still strength in the notion that safety is in numbers. Even with Concourse and Megastructures, Whyte found that if the structure is too far removed from a heavily occupied area, no matter how well designed, the facilities will not be used.

3: Men are often found in at entrances, such as gates. Though I still struggle with the notion that men are the ‘protectors’ and a woman’s sole purpose is to nurture, I simply can’t argue with the fact that historically, that’s been the case. That it still holds true in a basic social behavior taking place in urban areas is fascinating to me. By gathering at the open (read: vulnerable) ends of the plazas and sitting areas, as well as noticeably gathering at the gate of enclosed areas, they are proving that somehow they are still programmed to protect their herd, if you will.

4: People do not use wide open spaces. Wide open spaces leave prey vulnerable to predators. Would you want to sit down in the middle of a wide open field, unprotected on all sides, if you could picnic beneath a shade tree, protecting you from behind? Though the tree may seem appealing for a number of reasons, including shade and a back rest, you are naturally programmed to gravitate to the tree where you will be protected vs. the wide open field.

5: People will sit and stand where they can be surrounded by people. Again, this leans back to the safety in numbers theory. It is, however, counter-intuitive that a conversation is best had in a heavily trafficked area, like busy steps in front of a well used entryway. Nonetheless, Whyte finds that the travelers dance around those sitting and standing on the steps and don’t seem to be affected by the supposed inconvenience whatsoever.

If you were a designer designing a park with unlimited funding, you would likely incorporate all kinds of seating areas using benches chairs and seating arrangements that one might think people would find comfortable. It is even more likely that you would place these seating areas off the beaten path. Trouble is, that you’ve accommodated a person’s physical comfort, but not incorporated their need for social comfort. As Whyte’s study of urban space shows, the two are not equal, and surprisingly, many of his observed users would rather sacrifice physical comfort for social comfort than vice versa.

My question? If such careful thought and planning is given to the design of physical spaces, why can’t the same principles applied to electronic spaces and why hasn’t this become standard practice? I haven’t noted that my design group thinks as much about the user as they do about the appearance of a web page as long as the basic requirements are met and everything works and is navigable. However, it seems to me that if everything is in one place—where the sitting area, the traffic pattern, the communal urban space—then it becomes well liked, well used, and well traveled. Perhaps even more so than its aesthetically superior counterpart. Will website design and architecture translate Whyte’s social findings and be more effective because of their application, or are the aesthetics of design too important?
In the last edition of Technically Speaking, we featured Johndan Johnson-Eilola. This issue, we feature a Q&A with Clay Spinuzzi, another scholar whose work many of us have encountered at one point or another in our graduate studies. Clay is an associate professor of Rhetoric at the University of Texas at Austin. He received his PhD from Iowa State in 1999, before heading to Texas Tech University for two years. From there, he moved to the University of Texas at Austin, where he has been since the fall of 2001.

Many of us in the NCSU MS-TC program are familiar with (and were thoroughly blown away by) Clay’s work in Tracing Genres Through Organizations: Tracing Genres Through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design (published by MIT Press, October 2003). His latest work, Network: Theorizing Knowledge Work in Telecommunications (published by Cambridge University Press, 2008) examines the telecommunications industry through two warring (but equally utilitarian) theoretical approaches, Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory. Spinuzzi’s intent seems twofold: 1) to bury the hatchet that divides work-theory driven scholarship and; 2) uncover how organizations succeed at net work. It is a valuable contribution to the fields of rhetorical, labor, organizational and communications theory. Clay has also written numerous articles and book introductions, so his work is well represented in various formats.

Clay was kind enough to answer these questions for me as he was preparing for the release of Network. He is a kind and knowledgeable guy and I encourage all to take the time to read his valuable insight. Finally, I encourage all to seek out Clay’s online presence (it is quite substantial, as he is a definitive net worker himself). Two good places to start are his blog and homepage, which are located respectively at http://spinuzzi.blogspot.com/ and http://focus.cwrl.utexas.edu/spinuzzi/. He also posts regularly to Friend Feed and Twitter.

JWW: Users are becoming increasingly active participants in technology, specifically in how they can create and repurpose content for their own uses. Furthermore, we cannot deny the political nature of technology. How do you think the practice of technical communication is affected by the democratization of content creation? How should technical communication adapt to ensure that its work remains seen as value-added? Johndan, I know that you discuss the need for new improved ways of working to actually take advantage of technology’s promise in both Nostalgic Angels and DataCloud. Do you see particular areas where technical communication, as a field, is missing out here by not adapting either enough or quickly enough?

CS: Yes, technical communication is having trouble keeping up with the changes described above. Here’s one example I use in an upcoming article.

In his classic The Nurnberg Funnel (1990), John Carroll emphasizes writing for the “active user”: he advocates writing “minimal manuals” that give users the basics and encourage them to explore the software on their own. After all, Carroll points out, software documentors simply cannot address every possible user case.

But when content creation is democratized, every possible user case can be addressed. Printed manuals, like the ones Carroll described, are expensive to write and produce, and no company can afford the hordes of writers and subject-matter experts needed to write thousands of pages of cases customized for the many activities in which consumer software is used. On the other hand, the costs of publishing web pages, discussion forums, blog comments, and other online social interactions are minimal, and every reader is potentially a documentor. The active users that Carroll described have become active writers who answer each others’ questions – and carry on conversations – about even the most specific and localized cases.

So when you introduce the democratization of content creation – when you radically lower the costs of exchanging this sort of information and when you introduce incentives such as social capital for exchanging it – the job description of a software documentor changes. It doesn’t simply shift from talking at an audience to talking to an audience. It now has to involve creating and managing conditions for successful professional communication; it means forming, supporting, and managing user communities and community spaces. In my first book, I characterized this approach as that of developing "starter ecologies"; now we need more sophisticated thinking about how this sort of substrate formation and community management can be accomplished.

Of course, there are plenty of opportunities for traditional documentation, mostly outside the consumer sector. So those traditional documentation skills are still needed, but they have to be connected with the skills above. Technical communicators need to start thinking in terms of documentation strategies, not just individual genres.

JWW: The term “technical communicator” covers so many different types of roles: writers, editors, information architects, web developers, instructional designers, usability testers, etc.... For instance, Michael Salvo and others have written about information architecture as natural postmodern context in which to apply technical communication skills. What do you make of this? Should technical communicators look to these emergent fields and seek to define them as
their natural domains? Do you see this as an advantage or disadvantage to the field and its traditional role in the creation of documentation?

On a similar note, much has been written about the dilution of technical communication into different roles and the resulting identity crisis within the field. What do you think about something like professional accreditation for technical communication along the lines of tests for lawyers, architects, etc.? Is it necessary? Is it possible?

CS: As I suggest above, we do need to examine and understand these emergent fields. However, like other interdisciplinary fields, we have a bad habit of cherry-picking ideas, methods, theories, and (most regrettably) buzzwords from other fields and disciplines; and we also have a bad habit of mixing up this cherry-picking behavior with occupying and claiming those fields and disciplines. Our field has unique issues and challenges, which are often only superficially similar to those of the affiliated fields and disciplines, and we can’t just apply their solutions or assume that they’re working on the same problems we are.

JWW: On a similar note, much has been written about the dilution of technical communication into so many different roles and the resulting identity crisis within the field. What do you think about something like professional accreditation for technical communication along the lines of tests for lawyers, architects, etc.? Is it necessary? Is it possible?

CS: I like the idea of a core set of competencies and skills, as long as they’re broadly enough defined, but I don’t think professional accreditation would work for technical communicators as a whole. You might be able to do something along these lines for clearly defined specializations, such as technical editors or writers of software reference manuals. My main concern is that technical communication necessarily changes as the result of changes in communication technologies and tasks, and we’re in the middle of very rapid change; in many cases, a list of core competencies will be outdated within a few years. Nobody was talking about online community management as a core competency ten years ago, when I was finishing my Ph.D. Now it is. Mobile phones, the mobile web, and location-based applications will make a major impact in this sector, probably resulting in further upheaval; Google “Enkin” and “Tonchidot” for early examples.

JWW: How did you get into TC? At what point in your professional or academic career did you decide to focus on technical communication? How or why did you make this decision?

CS: I was a computer science major and took the required introductory technical writing course my sophomore year. Although I was a strong writer, I had a lot of trouble getting my head around technical writing style. Once it clicked, I saw many connections between nuts-and-bolts technical writing and programming: both were structured, both focused on instructions and descriptions, both enabled people to do things they couldn’t do otherwise. Soon I made technical writing my minor. After graduation, I took a semester off, then enrolled in the graduate program in English with an emphasis in technical writing.

JWW: You are taking a group of students to a remote location for 6 months to turn them into good technical communicators...sort of like tech comm boot camp. What three books do you take? In other words, desert island books for TC?


*Writing Winning Business Proposals: Your Guide to Landing the Client, Making the Sale and Persuading the Boss* by Richard C. Freed and Joe Romano

*Contextual Design: A Customer-Centered Approach to Systems Designs* by Hugh Beyer and Karen Holtzblatt. (It’s not a TC book, but it teaches a research methodology that is directly applicable.)

JWW: What recommendations, if any, do you have for technical communicators in collaborative writing environments?

CS: Become familiar with two types of collaborative software:

- A project management or task management system such as Basecamp, Wrike, or Remember the Milk. Collaborative projects need a mutual environment for planning, delegation, accountability, and archives.

- A collaborative writing environment such as Google Docs or Zoho Docs. Collaborative projects also need a mutual environment for producing documents, examining change history, and enabling edit cycles.
This section features a listing of helpful resources. Some are websites, some are blogs, some are newsgroups and others are list-serve type of things. The Triangle area happens to be a VERY busy area, with an overwhelming number of resources for technical communicators. Hopefully, this list will be a helpful means to aggregate all of this information. If you are aware of a resource that you think would be helpful to others and you think it should be included on this list, please send the name, a short description and the URL to john_williams@ncsu.edu. Please note that the Department maintains a separate, more comprehensive list of resources.

NC State University ANd LoCAL rESoUrCES

NC State Technical Communication Department http://www.chass.ncsu.edu/english/msprog/source.html
Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media (CRDM) Ph.D http://www.chass.ncsu.edu/crdm/
NC State Graduate School http://www.ncsu.edu/grad/
DH Hill Library http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/
NC State Digital Media Lab Usability Lab http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/usability/index.html

GENERAL STC rESoUrCES

International STC Site http://www.stc.org/
Carolina Chapter of the STC http://www.stc-carolina.org/
NC State Student Chapter of the STC http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/
NC State Student Chapter of the STC Weblog http://writetech.org/

NETWORKING & LEARNING

Usability Professionals Association http://www.upassoc.org/
Triangle Usability Professionals Association http://www.triupa.org/
E-Server Technical Communication Library http://tc.eserver.org/

A NICE LISTING of rhETorIC & CoMMUNICATIoN JoUrNALS

http://www.americanrhetoric.com/communicationjournals.htm
Techwr-L (a resource site focused on Technical Writing) http://www.techwr-l.com/

COOL & FREE TOOLS (IF YOU DON’T HAVE DOUGH FOR ADOBE PRODUCTS)

Dreamspark/Microsoft Expression (Thousands of $$ https://downloads.channel8.msdn.com/
Worth of Free SW for Students)---no kidding
Lotus Symphony (free apps suite from IBM) http://symphony.lotus.com/
Open Office (great, free, open-source full office suite) http://www.openoffice.org/

GENERAL LISTING of frEE WEb APPLICATIoNS

http://www.protolize.org/
Wufoo (free, easy form builder) http://wufoo.com/
Adobe Photoshop Express (free basic Photoshop image editing) https://www.photoshop.com/express
Splashup (free, online image editing) http://www.splashup.com/
XNView (great free file browser) http://pagesperso-orange.fr/pierre.g/xnview/enhome.html
Format Pixel (web app for creating’page’ based presentations) http://www.formatpixel.com/

OTHER THINGS TO WATCH FOR

Ronnie Duncan’s job Hunting Tips: every now and then, Ronnie Duncan, principle of Timely Text (http://www.timelytext.com/) will visit to deliver a presentation of critical interviewing and job hunt skills. This has become a popular event in the department and a opportunity you cannot afford to miss.
Dr. Dicks’ listserve messages: Dr. Dicks circulates frequent listserve messages, featuring hot tips on local and regional employment opportunities. Many of these positions are either unlisted or posted with Dr. Dicks first. Enrolled students and alumni are the only ones who receive these messages, so make sure you have your spam filter cleared to receive these messages.
IBM-NC State Pathfinder Mentoring Program: This is a joint venture between NC State and IBM to provide students the unique opportunity to spend time with current professionals in their domain expertise areas and learn more about life in the field.
Public Service Opportunities: The NC State Student Chapter of the STC organizes several public service events per year. The group has made public service a priority for this academic year, so watch out for numerous opportunities to give something back to your community.
The following events are planned. Please visit the NCSU-STC Weblog or monitor future issues of Technically Speaking for updated information as it becomes available. All dates and events are tentative and subject to change.

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**KEY TO THE ABOVE:**

- E = EDUCATIONAL;
- S = SOCIAL;
- R = REST AND RELAXATION;
- C = CHARITABLE

**WATCH OUT FOR THE NCSU-STC’S 2ND ANNUAL GAME NIGHT**

Join your fellow MS peers in addition to local Technical Communications professionals for our second annual game night. You will be guaranteed:

- Snacks
- Lots of fun
- An opportunity to challenge classmates and others to a random game
  - A chance to show off your favorite game
  - Just plain old, good-fashioned comraderie
  - A chance to meet John Martin

Please stay tuned and visit the NCSU-STC student chapter website for additional information as it becomes available:

[http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/](http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/)