Hello and welcome to the May 2009 edition of Technically Speaking. This is a wonderful time of the year in my opinion. I used to be ambivalent about springtime. I was a fall guy (some pun intended). However, and likely for many reasons, I absolutely love this time of the year. It represents renewal, as the trees sprout leaves and flowers start to blossom. Fresh sights and smells tickle the senses; for some of us who suffer from allergies, the wrong senses. The dread and drudgery of long stints of sub-40 weather and rain give way to the clarifying warmth of the sun and gentle spring breezes. Spring also brings fond memories of the birth of my son Julian, who turned 4 a few weeks ago.

I seem to do my best work in the spring. I love to sit out on my porch, even late into the night (morning?) I read, sketch, work on projects, or even brainstorm about projects and ideas. This was especially important this year, as I, along with nine more of your fellow MSTC’s, approached the milestone of 675 defenses. English 675 was implemented by the program a while back in lieu of traditional thesis requirements. The course is a required capstone that we all have to take, preferably as late as possible in our MSTC tenures. These projects represent the culmination of years of hard work and scholarship in technical communication and its associated fields.

Congratulations to all the students who successfully completed their 675 project defenses: Angel Brantley, Anne Roth-Strickland, Robin Weinke, Alison Weaver, Sam Kadwell, John Strange, Leigh Samuel, Kris Stoddard and John Williams.

Our congratulations as well to those leaving the MS program with master’s degrees: Brantley, Rebecca L. O’Connell, Roth-Strickland, Samuel, Stoddard, Strange, and myself.

In this edition, you will find the usual President’s Pen column, and also a piece from a former NCSU-STC president, NC State alum and really good-guy John Martin has kindly shared his experiences and observations on a Fall 2008 trip he took to China. The trip, which was sponsored by the international STC, sent a group of US practitioners to observe technical communication in a Chinese context.

I will be leaving Raleigh following completion of my 675 project. I have accepted a job with IBM in Boston and will miss Raleigh and NC State. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the MS faculty and all of the great, bright friends I have made while I have been here. I am sure I will see you all at some events, like the STC conferences (I can’t go this year).
Reflection, nostalgia, gratitude
by John Strange, 2008-09 Co-president

In just a handful of days, I’ll have a master’s degree in technical communication.

I’m already nostalgic for NC State.

About two years ago, after being laid off from my job at a NC nonprofit, I found myself back at school. This was 20 years after I got my bachelors, and I was not a happy camper. I was convinced I was too old and tired to go back to school, and besides, did you know they make you read deep, interminable, gray, difficult academic papers all week long? Weekends too?

And sometimes you have to write about what you just read, which means you have to read these papers carefully. With the real difficult papers, you’re reading paragraphs three, four, five times over and over, again and again, just to get the gist of what the writer is trying to say.

It wasn’t long before I needed reading glasses. Literally.

But the work had to be done. And it was done, although I have no idea how.

I owe it all to Amy, my wife of 20-plus years. I had been kicked in the gut professionally, and she knew instinctively that I had to go get a master’s. She didn’t exactly twist my arm, but I did resist, and she did get me here. And she was right. Oh, was she ever right.

I owe her big time for pushing me into Tompkins Hall, and I will never be able to thank her enough for twisting my arm (I lied in the paragraph just above, she did practically twist my arm) and for supporting me the last two years. A master’s degree in technical communication turned out to be the best thing for me.

Throughout my time at NC State, I would make lists for myself in the back of my notebooks. I’m sure you do them too:

Read all those essays for Monday’s class, post to the class list Sunday night, pick up the milk and eggs, set the DVR for your favorite shows, ‘cause you won’t be watching TV for another month.

But often I would add an item in the margins of my lists, in all caps: “BE A GRADUATE STUDENT.”

You didn’t ask for it, but this is the advice I leave you. Embrace your graduate student-ness. Put energy into the state of student.

By this, I don’t mean make sure you get all your reading done. No, what I mean is that I encourage you to put yourself “out there” at NC State. Attend and participate in the free symposiums, workshops, plays, exhibits and events available to you. Volunteer. Propose your research for the next symposium. Send your A-plus book review to the journal of your choice.

These days will be over before you can read a long and gray chapter by Peck MacDonald on constructionists, deconstructionists and the making of knowledge. It just won’t seem like it.

Here are four easy and accessible ways that you can follow my unsolicited advice right now:

- Join our student chapter of the Society for Technical Communication and get involved and connected. Most of our officers are graduating from the program, and we need some new people to join up. This is also the best way to connect with the professional technical communicators in the Triangle. Contact our incoming president, Nicole Black (snblack@ncsu.edu) for information.

- Attend the STC Carolina meetings and events. Joining the student group automatically makes you a member of the professional group.

- Attend the Society for Technical Communication annual summits. It’s too late for Atlanta May 3-6, but these are held once a year. You also would like to know that the STC offers online seminars, often free, on things you would want to know about, from job-hunting skills to tutorials on new software.

- Finally, attend the defense sessions that are held every April. During these sessions, students who are taking ENG 675, the master’s capstone course for technical communication, present and discuss their master’s projects. You owe it to yourself to see what it’s about from the audience side of the PowerPoint.

Care to comment? Write me at jestrang@ncsu.edu.
I spent the last two weeks of October in 2008 visiting Chinese companies, government agencies, and educational departments whose work involves some kind of technical communication.

As a member of the People-to-People Technical Communication Delegation to the People’s Republic of China, I traveled—along with a diverse group of technical communicators—to Beijing in the Northeast, Guilin in South Central, and to Shanghai in the East Central parts of China.

Our delegation included members from the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Belgium. We had 15 delegates and five guests, which included two husbands, one partner, one son, and one daughter.

The delegates hailed from large companies such as Sun, HP, Molex, TranSenda and Symantec, as well as from North Carolina State University, from the American Dermatology Association, and a small privately-owned company called Michaels & Associates. Also, the delegates represented a variety of technical communication specialty areas including the president of a training company, senior managers of large corporations, editors, writers, Web content developers, a marketer, and a user experience specialist.

Our delegation set forth with both professional and personal goals. The professional goals were to: 1) gain a better understanding of the common interests and challenges we share with our fellow professionals in China, and 2) to assess the state of technical communication in three diverse cities in China.

My personal goals were to: 1) learn from each other—both within our own delegation, as well as between our delegation and those with whom we met, and 2) to engage in the shared humanity of all of us.

In Beijing, we visited a university and two government agencies—Peking University, Beijing Association of Science and Technology (BAST), and Cyber Recreation District, respectively. The standard agenda for each meeting involved introductions of the delegates, followed by the hosts; a presentation by the delegation leader on the “State of Technical Communication in the U.S.; followed by presentations from each group on topics of interest determined in advance by People-to-People with input from both groups.

We arrived at Peking University only to have our bus stopped at the entrance, because it was unable to pass under a banner with Chinese writing on it that had been hung across the road. While we waited for someone to come to disconnect one side of it, our delegation guide and translator, Shawn, told us that it said, “Welcome People-to-People Technical Communication Delegation.”

Getting past that and arriving at the front entrance to the building in which we were to meet, we found a few people scurrying to complete laying out a red carpet from the driveway where our bus parked to the building entrance. Some of us made comments like, “Oh, how nice is that?!?” and “Really, there’s no need to go to so much trouble and rush just for us.” Then, we were informed that the President of Indonesia was visiting today, too, and all the fuss was actually for him!

Our other two visits in Beijing were to the Beijing Association of Science and Technology and the Cyber Recreation District, which were both government agencies. In each of our visits, our delegation presented “The State of Technical Communication in the U.S.,” which was followed by presentations by both groups on pre-arranged and agreed-upon topics, all set up by the People-to-People organization.

In Guilin, we visited the Guilin Hunter Information Industry Limited Corporation and the Guilin Programmers Club. We had interesting and lively discussion with the programmers in the programmers’ club, as most of them couldn’t grasp what Technical Communication even was, even after Googling the term and reading through many items in the results list!

In Shanghai, we met with the Chinese offices of two International companies, Accenture and Hewlett-Packard.

Note that what follows are my personal observations from a small sample size, so I’m not making any sweeping generalizations about the state of technical communication in China in general.

--continued on page 5--
Educational Opportunities

Design Research: a Workshop Review
by J. Wilton Williams, Newsletter Editor

The Triangle area offers a wealth of valuable resources to individuals in technical communications and experience design roles. While we all know about the great educational opportunities at the “Big 3” Triangle-area universities and the smaller schools in the area, there are other less visible sources of education. The Carolina Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication should be familiar to everyone in the NCSU-MSTC program. They offer a wealth of opportunities to supplement your education throughout the year. Other smaller organizations such as the Triangle Usability Professionals Association (or TriUPA) offer less regular, but equally valuable opportunities and a change to engage with leaders in the field. Approximately every other month, the TriUPA offers a workshop or seminar with nationally recognized user researchers, designers and developers.

On February 20, 2009, I attended one such event, a “Design Research Workshop” with Todd Wilkens, a user researcher at Adaptive Path. Adaptive Path is a design consultancy whose mission is “to deliver great experiences that improve people's lives, while sharing our advances in the field with our clients, partners, and peers.” Wilkens’ workshop provided a glimpse into the research methodologies employed by Adaptive Path as they seek to fulfill their stated mission.

Approximately forty area professionals from fields such as experience design, technical communications and others attended the workshop at the Triangle Research Institute in RTP. The event provided an opportunity to meet area practitioners and to work with new faces and minds on a series of challenging, fun design problems.

Wilkens outlined a variety of useful questions and answer to ensure that user needs, goals and motivations remain as the primary focus throughout the research process. Adaptive Path considers questions and answers, rather than methods, as the goal of proper user research. Methods are simply means to an end and the use of multiple methods to triangulate any data or findings.

Qualitative, contextual research was the overarching theme in keeping users as central to the research plan. Wilkens pointed out that, although any comprehensive research plan will incorporate plenty of discussion about things such as improved communication within the design and development team, this discussion should remain focused on one thing- to create the best user experience. With this basic premise established, I will summarize Wilkens’ main points:

Key highlights and take-aways:

- We need to define clear objectives and define them early. These objectives need to cover the project as a whole-not just the research component.
- Locating background material in the early stages of objectives definition is difficult. However, a bit of creativity can overcome any problems. Look in every nook and cranny. Marketing can be helpful, since they have the most contact with users, but a body of vested stakeholders is a gold mine in research planning.
- Optimize any contact with stakeholders. All interaction with stakeholders should focus on their motivations and behaviors.
- One thing to remember is that you cannot rely on users to tell you about their problems. Users are bad at predicting their own behaviors, but good at recalling behaviors. You cannot rely on users to focus on things they do not care about; thus, it is crucial to “know” the users and as much as possible about their goals early in the process.
- You can be quite creative in developing methodologies. Rather than conducting a traditional, by-the-book field research, ask them to keep a notebook/journal; ask them if you can see the inside of their top drawer; have them tell you a story about their experiences.
- If any single skill will make you stand out as a great researcher, being a good listener is it.
- A goal of any Q+A research should be to ask no questions at all. Let the user talk, even through awkward silences.
- Methods for turning research into insight: look for patterns; group activities; dimensions and proto-personas

Continued on page 5
• Improve communication and interaction among the team, as a conduit to communicate user needs.

Williams, Workshop review, continued from page 4

Wilkens wrapped up the day by outlining ways to turn insight into design. The “Design Research” workshop provided a valuable opportunity to see how others incorporate planning into the research, requirements definition and design process. While none of this material was particularly revolutionary or earth shattering, the value of such a workshop lies in the simplicity and familiarity of Adaptive Path’s methods. After all, user needs, goals and motivations are varied and, often, extremely complex. There is no need to be overly complex in executing the discovery of such things. We must remain open-minded and not be overly concerned with rigid methodologies. The key take away was to plan, plan early, ensure that user motivations, needs, and goals remain as the focus of all decisions, listen, listen, listen and stick to the plan.

To learn more about Adaptive Path and its work, visit http://adaptivepath.com. They have a very active blog and the site serves as a rich source for research.

The Triangle Usability Professionals Association organizes regular free get-togethers that present a great opportunity to meet other area UX, usability and technical communications professionals. All paid events and workshops feature discount rates for students. I also recommend a visit to the TriUPA site at http://triux.org for information about upcoming events.

John Wilton Williams is the STC Newsletter editor for 2008-2009. He finishes the program in May 2009. He currently works as a User Experience Design coop at IBM, and is moving on to Boston for new work with IBM. His wife Alison and his 4 year-old son, Julian, will soon be the beneficiaries of all of the time he has when he no longer has to focus on school.

---Martin, China, continued from page 3---

With that said, I characterized it similar in a lot of ways to “early days in the U.S.” with regards to the profession:

• It’s in its infancy
• It’s not well-understood
• It’s narrowly scoped
• University curriculums are beginning to emerge
• Considered only late in the product development cycle

Some of the challenges of the profession in China include:

• A general lack of proficiency in English, which hinders their global participation
• Learning by apprenticeship versus by job descriptions and processes
• Cultural behaviors (e.g., soft-spoken versus outspoken)

I also noted these terminology differences: Technical communications in the U.S. is about communicating about products and services, while in China it’s about communicating with people. Communication, more broadly, in general in the U.S. is about expressing information, while in China it’s about building relationships. And, finally, the word Accessibility in the profession in the U.S. is about content being available to persons with disabilities, while in China it’s used to talk about content being available to different classes and younger people.

In addition to the coveted opportunity to meet technical communication counterparts in China, our delegation enjoyed a “cultural day” day in each city we visited. In Beijing, we went to the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, and the Forbidden City. In Guilin, we had an afternoon cruise down the beautiful Li River, and in Shanghai, we spent a couple of hours at the Shanghai Museum, some time at The Bund, visited a silk rug-making shop, and shopped at a local bazaar.

John Martin works as a Technical Communicator for North Carolina State University, has his MS in Technical Communication from NCSU, is currently a member of the STC-Carolina Chapter, and is a Past-President and Newsletter Editor of the NCSU STC Student Chapter.
These are tough economic times. Many of my colleagues are without jobs or are scouting openings because they feel insecure about the jobs that they have. What can we technical communicators do? Put our writing skills to work for us.

One thing that I learned during my job search in 2007 is that you should always keep your resume up to date, regardless of how secure you feel in your current position. I also learned the value of creating and maintaining a marketing plan, which focuses your time and effort when you are searching for employment. Whether you are out of work or employed and pondering your next career move, both documents are critical to landing a rewarding job.

Your resume sells you to prospective employers. You want to tell hiring managers about your career to date but want them to be eager to learn more. As you write or revise it, think about how you want it to direct an interview.

Some tips for writing an effective resume include:

**For every accomplishment that you list, be sure that you actively did or delivered something.** On many resumes that I have seen, including my own at one time, there were bullets that described being a “member of a team” that did something. That’s fine, but a hiring manager is not considering your team, she is considering you. What was your specific role on the team? What did you contribute or deliver? Did you bring the team together? Did you lead it? Did you organize meetings and take minutes?

**For every way that you describe yourself, whether as a team player, a goal-oriented project leader, and so on, be prepared to tell an anecdote that illustrates that quality.** If you do not have such a story, replace the item with one that allows you to tell such a story. You get bonus points if your accomplishments tie to your qualities. For example, if you say you are a goal-oriented project leader, it helps if you follow that up by reporting that you led a team to deliver a large and complex documentation set on an aggressive deadline.

**Focus on deliverables and accomplishments that clearly contribute to the trajectory of your career.** If you point out that you were a volunteer for the United Way, do not list it on your resume unless you can clearly explain how that experience prepared you for the position for which you are applying. Did working for the United Way help you develop fund-raising skills? Did you solicit contributions by phone or in person? That’s good to have if you want a sales position.

Use **strong verbs in your resume.** In your summary, you can say that you have “experience producing materials that facilitate understanding and clarity for internal and external users” or that you “write and edit clear, direct content that helps users get work done quickly.” The second phrase is more powerful and persuasive than the first, because you can picture someone getting work done by reading content, whereas it is tougher to imagine someone having their understanding facilitated by whatever it is you do.

A resume tells a prospective employer what you have done and how your experience makes you the best candidate for an open position. A marketing plan, on the other hand, guides you in selecting the best position for your skills and experience. A resume explains what you did — a marketing plan captures what you want. You want to precisely define the target market for your job search so that you do not waste time — yours or your interviewer’s.

A few simple steps can help you get started developing your marketing plan.

**Identify the industry or type of organization for which you want to work.** If you have spent nearly all your career in the computer industry, it is logical to target that industry. But will you limit your search to that industry, or will you consider others? What about pharmaceuticals, health-care, or energy? Going to a new industry may mean that you would have to consider a less senior position, but if hiring in the computer industry is tight, a less senior position might be better than none at all. By expanding your range of target industries, you may find a job that exercises your talent and skill better than you had ever imagined.

**Do you want to work for a big or small company?** Would you prefer a Fortune 500 company or an up-and-coming firm? Do you feel more productive in a large or small workgroup? Give some thought to these questions.

**Identify the geographical area where you want to work.** Are you rooted to where you now live? Would you be willing to relocate? If so, what locations interest you? In tough times, the answer may be “wherever there is a paying job,” but consider the expenses of moving, both in terms of money and spirit, before accepting a position purely because of pay.

Also think hard about your personal preferences in terms of work/life balance and career aspirations. Think about the kinds of tasks that you like to do, day in and day out. In

---

**Need a job? Use your skills and communicate your value**

By Michael Harvey, STC Carolina Past President
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.

NCSU and Local Resources
NCSU 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/
NCSU Graduate School http://www.ncsu.edu/grad/
DH Hill Library http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/
NCSU 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/
NCSU Student Chapter of the STC http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/
NCSU 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/

--- Job market, continued from page 6---

a tough job market we cannot let personal preferences rule our decision-making, but we cannot ignore them either. A workplace is where you spend the better part of your life. Is it important to you to work in a supportive environment where ongoing learning is encouraged?

Can you sit alone at a desk and not say a word to anyone all day, or do you need to interact with others? Ask questions during the interview to give you a sense of these things.

When you finish your marketing plan, it will look something like this:

**Professional objective with preferred function:** for example, “Technical communicator who wants to lead projects and communicate complex technical material to a variety of audiences. Preferred functions include writing and editing, project management, and making technical presentations.”

**Competencies:** for example, “writing and editing, project management, team building, motivating others, mentoring, budgeting.”

**Target market characteristics:** these will include all your personal preferences, such as “within 25 miles of Raleigh” and “a large, diverse workgroup.”

Provide a list of specific industries and companies that appeal to you.

Your marketing plan helps you focus the conversation whenever you discuss the kinds of jobs that you prefer with your network of contacts. Your contacts will have an easier time referring you to others because they clearly understand your target position. And sooner or later, one of those referrals will result in a hiring manager perusing your resume. That well-written resume will guide a successful interview. That interview could lead to you landing the job that you want and deserve.

As tough as these times are, you owe it to yourself to be prepared for job loss. Use your writing skills to create a marketing plan and resume now, so that you can put them to best use for an employer later.

*Reprinted with permission from the Carolina Communiqué, newsletter of the Carolina Chapter of the STC.*
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.