



Canadian SIGnals

Newsletter for the STC Canadian Issues Special Interest Group

Aaron Babel, Publicity Manager for the STC's Toronto Chapter, handed out dozens of newsletters -- including copies of Canadian SIGnals -- during the Word on the Street festival in Toronto on September 29. Visitors to the chapter's booth also learned about the profession of technical communications from chapter members. It was the second year that the chapter has promoted the STC at the festival.
(Photo by Eric Elstone)



Contents

Technical writing – beyond night school	2
Dues issue clouded, silver lining possible	3
Working outside Canada	5
Teaching as professional development	6
Two technical writing programs	7

Technical writing – beyond night school

by Ralph E. Robinson

Technical writers in Canada do not enjoy the same recognition as our counterparts in the United States do. Why? Partly because of a gap in our education system.

Many colleges and universities in the U.S. offer degrees in technical writing or technical communication. In Canada technical writing is considered less than a profession, so most courses now offered are part of the extension division of our universities and colleges. There is a start in Canadian full-time courses offered for professional technical communication. (Mount Royal College, Red River College, Douglas College, Seneca College and University of Waterloo.)

The Canadian academic community definitely needs to develop a formal curriculum in technical writing that establishes a starting point for proficiency in the field. Although hours could be spent arguing just what a technical writer does, and, therefore, what would constitute this baseline, certain basic skills are required in most areas of endeavour in the field.

What should be taught? Core Courses

Based on my personal observation of written material submitted by college and university students, it is evident our pre-college/university education system places little or no emphasis on proper spelling or grammar. While you might believe it inappropriate to teach such basic skills at the college/ university level, this education must be gained some-where. Ideally our high school graduates should possess these skills, but the sad truth is they do not!

Determining what material is needed, what can be left out, and the best method of delivery is a critical consideration. Key skills a professional technical writer must develop are research techniques and well-

honed interviewing techniques. They must know where expert knowledge resides.

Knowing your audience has a major impact on the effectiveness of any communication. But just how do we determine who the audience is? What things do we need to know about our audience? These and many other reader characteristics must be identified to write effective material.

The ability to format technical material in a manner that encourages reading is another area of great importance. With the variety of communication media in today's world, knowledge of what works, and when, is crucial to the successful writer – especially with complex technical matters. While this factor may be of greater importance in some writing than in others, it should always remain a key consideration.

There is a definite need within the Canadian academic community to develop a formal curriculum in technical writing that establishes a starting point for proficiency in the field.

Closely related to format is the use of graphic elements. The old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words" is generally, but not always, true. Graphic elements can be a tremendous aid to understanding, but they can also add an element of confusion when not properly used. How do you know when to use graphic elements? How do you determine which graphic element aids understanding and which contributes to confusion? When is too much, too much?

What should be taught? Elective Courses

The use of elective courses allows an institution to provide a broad range of subjects that can be used by students to



tailor their education towards a specific career. The main emphasis, however, should be on developing skills in the various types or genres of technical writing, NOT on the tools used. Other areas that lend themselves to elective courses are single sourcing, knowledge management, program management, etc. Additional suggestions and guides for course structures may be found in the work completed by the STC's Core Competencies Committee.

How do we get there from here?

As members of the Canadian Issues SIG, each of us has an opportunity to influence the development of better educational opportunities for those who follow us. Most educational institutions have faculty advisory committees or some other mechanism by which they assess the educational requirements of the business communities they serve.

As a former member and chair of the Humber College Technical Manual Writing Faculty Advisory Committee in Toronto, I assure you there is always a need for members. While this work is always voluntary, you will get great personal satisfaction in helping an institution develop curricula that meet the future needs of professional technical writers. Volunteer to serve on a local committee.

Once there, begin to lobby for full-time programs and offer help with suggestions and advice.

Encourage your employer to seek out graduates from existing courses for employment – nothing spurs the development of educational programs like a demand from the business community. Better yet, get them to provide feedback to institutions on the need for additional courses and degree programs.

Actively lobby your provincial minister of education and other influential parties to promote the need for college and university level curricula in this field. Try to get your employer to assist in this area as well. If your efforts are successful, volunteer to assist in the development of the curriculum. Offer to teach in the areas of your expertise.

Ralph Robinson has a long-term interest in technical writing courses and the setting of standards. He teaches an ISO course at Sheridan College, in Brampton, Ontario, and serves on the Canadian Advisory Council to the Standards Council of Canada. A senior STC member, Ralph has also served on the advisory committee at Humber College in Toronto. He is employed at Honeywell Engines, Systems and Services, as the only member of the Document Management Group in Mississauga.

Dues issue clouded, silver lining possible

by Gordon Brown

No relief is in sight for Canadian STC members looking for a break on membership dues in the coming year. An ad hoc committee studying alternative STC dues structures has ruled out reducing dues as membership numbers are in a "tailspin," according to Bill Stolgitis, STC executive director.

"In May 2001, membership numbers reached the high point," he said, "They've been in a tailspin since then...Retention is

down 10 per cent worldwide last year versus this year," Mr. Stolgitis said.

The dues committee, struck last June by the STC Executive, compared 2002 membership totals against 2001 totals, he said. Year-over-year renewals and new memberships, while declining 10 per cent overall compared with 2001, declined less in Canada and Europe than in the United States.

Higher member retention in Canada and Europe than in the U.S. also played a part in the decision not to reduce dues, Mr. Stolgitis said. Membership dropped less in Canada and Europe—8 per cent and 3 per cent respectively—compared with a 10 per cent drop in the U.S.

“In Canada and overseas, the value is seen there,” Mr. Stolgitis said. And dues don’t cover annual operating costs. “But for conference income and other income, we would not exist. We could not exist on dues alone.”

Further reducing already declining membership revenue isn’t something the STC can afford. “Rather than changing the dues structure, the focus will be on retaining and attracting new members.

Annual dues were set at \$125 U.S. at renewal time last year, which ranged about and sometimes well above C\$200 after exchange.

The committee’s dues review key criteria were fiscal viability, growth across all skill families, ensuring that no one constituency overly subsidizes another, and continued delivery of services.

Dues may be tax deductible here

But while Canadian members’ dues may not be going down, they may be tax deductible. Dues are not tax deductible under Ontario tax guidelines as professional dues; they may be deductible as charitable contributions.

British Columbian STC members already can deduct membership dues from their income taxes, Mr. Stolgitis said. The STC was registered there as a charitable organization and that may be all that’s required for membership to be tax deductible in the other provinces.

The STC is investigating that possibility. If it is found that annual dues can be deducted as charitable contributions, an

announcement will be forthcoming. “We have the necessary forms. There are some wickets to go through,” wrote Mr. Stolgitis recently.

Member dues are tax deductible throughout the U.S. as charitable contributions based on U.S. tax rules that allow qualifying not-for-profit organizations to be taxed as charitable organizations and consequently member dues are at least in part tax deductible.

Chapter surpluses conform with U.S. tax laws

The issue of chapter surpluses is not a problem, according to Mr. Stolgitis. Under U.S. tax law, non-profit organizations such as the STC are normally permitted to carry two to three times their annual operating costs in surplus funds. The STC as a whole is not in violation of that guideline, nor are individual chapters, notwithstanding reported ongoing surpluses in Canadian chapters.

“Some chapters accumulate quite a bit of surplus funds” he said. But the best way to dissipate extra funds is through scholarships to technical communication programs. Monthly events and seminars offered to members and the public at a loss are also viable ways to spend surplus funds within the society mandate.

Under U.S. law, the STC is classed as a not-for-profit organization, but is granted tax exempt status as a charity. In return, the STC mandate is not to benefit its own, but to enrich the technical communication community and public as a whole.

Also see Gordon Brown's related article in Canadian SIGnals summer 2002 issue, "Canadian chapters carry surpluses, support reducing membership dues." Gordon is a senior STC member in Ottawa, where he documents Voice-over IP technology for Nortel Networks.



By Renka Gesing

Darn! I exclaimed to myself. I was halfway through the Detroit-Windsor tunnel, on my way to Belleville, Michigan, for some contract work, when I realized my TN (for Trade NAFTA) visa had expired a couple of weeks earlier. I had just returned from a canoe trip in northern Ontario, and that work-related logistical detail had completely slipped my mind.

Maybe, I thought, the customs official wouldn't notice. After all, I'm only one of about 4,000 Windsorites who cross the border at least a few times a week to work in the States. And I'm in only one of the thousands – well over 20,000 vehicles daily – that cross the border. Together, the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel and Ambassador Bridge handle more than one third of all trade volume between the U.S. and Canada. Usually, I just need to flash that 3" x 4 ¼" piece of paper stapled into my passport and the customs guy waves me through with nary a glance. Not that day; I got one with a chip on his shoulder. "What are you trying to do, crossing with an EXPIRED TN visa?" He enjoyed the theatrics of his rhetorical question and made a big show of sending me to U.S. immigration office. There I sat with other illegals, waiting my turn. I was issued a paper that noted "The alien named below has been refused admission into the United States," and was actually escorted back to my car, my passport returned to me only after I was back in the toll line down to Canada.

Having gone through this procedure every year for the past five years, I, of course,

had all the documentation necessary to renew my visa at home. I needed a letter from a U.S. employer and proof of the "minimum education requirements and alternative credentials" needed to get a TN visa under NAFTA guidelines. (Go to www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/nafta-alena/ for full information.)

The letter needs to state, among other things, a summary of your job duties, the arrangement for remuneration, and a title and description of your job. For a job title, I chose Technical Publications Writer, since that was the only title among the list of professionals approved for "cross-border movement" under NAFTA that had anything to do with technical communication. The minimum education requirement is a B.A. or post-secondary diploma. My bachelor's and master's degrees in French do the job.

By 10:30 that morning I was again back at the U.S. immigration office. (My toll expenses were rather high that day.) I waited, while a kid from Spain studying in the States was told he couldn't come back into the country. He had left the U.S. to have lunch in Windsor, and thus his visa was no longer valid. He was to be deported.

The immigration officer assigned to visa issues glanced at my papers, spoke a few words to me in Creole to show he too could speak some French, and gave me the TN visa card to fill out. A few minutes later I had paid the required \$50 U.S. cash and was on my way to Belleville, which is just past the Detroit airport. It was noon, so I still had half a day left for my "technical publications writing," which involves a variety of report editing, writing of user manuals and on-line help files, and documentation organization for the R&D department of a company that sorts nonferrous scrap metal.

Having had enough of the tunnel for one day, I took the bridge back.

Renka Gesing has recently branched into technical writing after running her own writing/editing business for many years.

Teaching as professional development

by *Alexa Campbell*

Have you ever taken a course and thought, “I could have done that.”? Then why aren’t you? Many technical communication programs in Canada are run by continuing education departments and staffed by part-time instructors. Many of them struggle to find qualified instructors. You might be the answer to an overworked recruiter’s dreams.

Teaching is a great way to give back—and a great way to increase your own learning. To be a successful teacher, you need to read and reflect in your field. The best teachers are the best learners. Teaching something to someone enhances your own learning, and is a good way to enhance your own practice. If you want to sharpen your editing skills, teach an editing course!

Teaching is a great way to give back – and a great way to increase your own learning

I started my own teaching career more than three decades ago in high school. When I left, I thought I’d never teach again. But then I was asked in my new job to teach some grammar courses. I was awful. Oh, I know my grammar, but I talked too much, tried to cover too much and I didn’t let my class talk. I didn’t even ask them what they wanted to know—I assumed I knew it all. We didn’t have fun.

I could have quit, but I realized I liked being back in the classroom. I decided to get better. I started learning about adult learning. I discovered Malcolm Knowles, and never looked back.

Consider teaching a technical communication course in your local continuing education program, or a class or two once or twice a term in a day program. You will probably find that harried instructors welcome the opportunity to get input from the

workplace, but sometimes they just don’t know who to ask.

What are some of the benefits to you?

- You add new skills to your repertoire. You learn new things and consolidate old learning.
- You meet people. You are networking.
- If your company is in hiring mode, you get a chance to see new talent in action.
- You increase your credibility. People are impressed when you say you teach at your local university or college. STC members treat you with new respect.
- You enhance your resume.
- You have fun.

Consider taking some courses yourself in adult education. After all, isn’t a lot of what we do as technical communicators adult education? The more you learn about the way adults learn, the more you pursue lifelong learning yourself, the better technical communicator you’ll be.

There are some downsides, of course. Continuing education programs don’t pay well, and they generally pay only for hours taught, not hours worked. Preparation is time-consuming. STC, however, has a program to subsidize new instructors to develop programs, called Industry Fellowships for Faculty, run through the Academe/Industry Committee.

But—the important thing is to get moving. Talk to someone you know who teaches. Call your local continuing education department. Watch for advertisements in your local newspaper. Find out what you need to do to become, even in a small way, a member of one of the world’s oldest professions.

Alexa Campbell teaches in the Technical Communication Diploma program at Red River College in Winnipeg. She is also working on her Master’s degree in adult education from the University of Manitoba.

Two technical writing programs



Mount Royal
College

by Michael J.
Bugdale

Mount Royal College in Calgary offers a full-time technical writing program that specializes in technical and report writing, graphic design and desktop publishing, marketing, document management, and writing in hypertext environments. Electives include computer science or a field of study that is approved. Here are some of the courses required to complete the Bachelor of Applied Communications Program – Technical Communications specialization: technical writing, data base design, arts and science, stylistics, entrepreneurship studies, software and system documentation, internet development, theories of communication, issues in communications, law and ethics, scripting instructional multimedia.

Contact:

mtroyal.ab.ca/Calendar/applied_degrees/BAClist.htm



Concordia
UNIVERSITY

Centre for
Continuing
Education

In Montreal, Concordia University's Center for Continuing Education offers a certificate program in Technical Communication, which appeals to newcomers and experienced technical communicators alike. Students must complete 10 courses of 20 hours each, for a total of 200 hours training. Five compulsory courses are: Introductory Technical Writing, Advanced Technical Writing, Advanced Topics for Technical Communicators, Technical Editing and Managing a Documentation Project. Five electives may be selected from technical courses such as FrameMaker, Web Page Creation for Non-Programmers, and Structured Programming using C. Electives may also be chosen from topic-oriented courses such as Medical Writing, Magazine Writing and Business Communication.

This immensely popular program requires three prerequisite courses: Word Processing, Introductory Computer Operating Systems and Basic Editing Practises, which may be waived. Contact: www.concordia.ca/conted



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Letters to the Editor

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