

Ascent

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President's message

STC-IC gives members opportunities

Greetings from the STC Intermountain Chapter (STC-IC) executive council and board, and welcome to the first issue of our newly revived chapter newsletter. We appreciate our newsletter editor, Jennifer Gibbs, for taking on this task, and we invite everyone to not only read the newsletter, but also to contribute to it and help make it the best it can be.

STC has much to offer, especially when it comes to being involved and taking an active role in the technical writing community. Below are just a few of the ways to participate:

Serve as a member of a board committee. The STC Intermountain chapter board consists of various committees, each of which is overseen by a committee manager. Serving on a committee is a great way to share your skills, or learn new ones. It doesn't have to take a lot of time—you decide how much or how little you want to do. To find out what positions are available or to contact a committee manager, access the chapter website and select "Volunteer Opportunities."

Attend chapter development meetings. Development meetings are held throughout the year at various locations. These meetings are a great way to meet people and keep up on the latest in our profession. Our Program Committee does a wonderful job of selecting interesting and helpful topics that benefit those who attend. Upcoming chapter events are posted to the chapter listserv. Or, you can access the chapter website and select "Meetings & Events."

Vote in STC elections. Take advantage of the opportunity to have a say in who is making decisions that affect you. It's the same old argument, but it's a good one. Take the time to take a stand!

Thank you for being a member of our chapter. We look forward to an exciting, energetic year!
—Melissa Jessop, STC-IC President

Chapter events

Publications

Congratulations to member Ann Gordon for the publication of "Hard Rock. Hard Tech. Hard Core." Co-authored with Mary Escedy, the article appeared in *Money Matters* and can be read online at <http://www.southernutahmagazines.com>.

Upcoming

Mark your calendar for these important events:

February—Time for many to renew membership and time for all of us to vote in the STC Region 5 election.

March—STC-IC will hold an event with sister organization ASTD. Look for the announcement on our website at March approaches.

April—Submissions for the spring issue of the IC-STC newsletter will be due. Contact Jenn Gibbs for more information at jgibbs@mckinnon-mulherin.com.

Impact

Identifying chapter membership value

Now that the STC offers various membership options through the Transformation Initiative, you may wonder whether being in a chapter is a valuable part of STC. Though the needs of each member are different, all current and potential STC members are invited to consider the value of an option that includes STC Intermountain Chapter (STC-IC) membership.

Your chapter membership gives you the following:

Professional Development. Monthly chapter meetings help you keep up with the current trends and developments in technical communication. Usually held in central locations, they also allow you to meet new friends who share your professional interests. In addition, the quarterly newsletter will keep you informed of chapter developments and occurrences.

Networking Opportunities. In a time of corporate layoffs and economic instability, networking opportunities are invaluable. As you associate with the Chapter members working in various technical communication specialties throughout the Wasatch Front, your chances of finding a job or internship increase.

Publication Competitions. By entering your creations in our chapter publication competitions, you can receive recognition for your hard labor. It's a great chance to show your stuff and to see what kind of work other people produce.

Leadership Opportunities. All professional chapter members are eligible to run for office on the Intermountain Chapter's executive board each year. Serving as an officer is a great chance to give professional service (and the title of "STC Intermountain Chapter Officer" looks nice on a resume).

Make a Difference. By contributing your ideas and time to the chapter, you help to enrich the technical communication field. You can also make a difference in the lives of other chapter members by sharing your skills, knowledge, and friendship.

If you have questions about your STC-IC membership, please contact an STC executive board officer.
—Tiffany Wheeler, STC-IC Education Committee Manager

“STC-IC’s executive board will be assessing the chapter’s needs, goals, and strategies for the coming years.”

STC seeks to help members with job searches

STC Region 1 Director-Sponsor Jonathan Baker has invited members of IC-STC to tell him how STC can further support their job searches.

He acknowledges that some members may not consider it enough that STC provides networking and professional development opportunities through chapters and SIGs. Yet, as Baker points out, STC lacks the resources to maintain a full-blown job placement service at the national level.

Baker is committed to bridging the gap between member need and organizational limitation. Any members with ideas on how STC can help members gain continued employment may contact him at jbaker2525@earthlink.net.

—Jenn Gibbs, Senior Writer, McKinnon-Mulherin

Chapters invited to re-charter in 2005

STC-IC's executive board will be assessing the chapter's needs, goals, and strategies for the coming years. The effort is a response to STC's invitation for chapters nationwide to re-charter as part of the Transformation Initiative.

Acknowledgments

Thank you

The STC-IC executive board wants to thank the Florida branch of Idea Integration for allowing us to use their conference line for our recent board meeting. One of our board members is a contractor for Idea Integration, a unit of MPS Group. Learn more about Idea Integration at <http://www.idea.com>

—D. A. Gordon, Owner, Gordon Computers

Discoveries

Single Sourcing with RoboHelp: Why and How

In spring 2003 I attended RoboHelp's "Basic/Intermediate Training Version X4" so that I could teach a course on help applications. But in the training course I was frustrated by the lack of an explanation for why we were structuring our help projects the way we were or even a discussion about why we might want to create a help project in the first place. So I decided to combine the methodology of single sourcing with the technology of a help application tool and taught a senior-level class as "Single Sourcing Using RoboHelp." I hoped to demonstrate for students the importance of applying theory to practice by combining help applications technology with single sourcing methodology.

I developed my course around the notion of modular writing, from Kurt Ament's *Single Sourcing: Building Modular Documentation*. Ament describes the process as

1. Evaluating content
2. Breaking content into the smallest possible modules
3. Labeling these modules
4. Configuring them into meaningful hierarchies
5. Linking these hierarchies to related hierarchies

To practice these principles I had my students write a summary of their software skills, compile a list of the content types in their help project, develop a set of standards and guidelines, conduct several user texts, evaluate other authoring tools, present their project to the class, and produce two different outputs of their help project (McShane). Within the first week of class students responded quite passionately in an online discussion about the process of modular writing and the technology of RoboHelp. One comment of particular concern was this one:

Single sourcing is a wonderful gift from the information organization gods! We are saved from the monotony of real thinking through the gift of stringent writing guidelines that we all get to follow. From the efficient uniform templates of module organization to the glorious mechanization of document "assembly," I for one see a bright future for those

choosing a career in technical assembly-line-writing. (Braegger)

But as the course progressed students discovered that new methodologies and technologies did not necessarily mean they would become automatons. A typical comment at the course's conclusion was this one:

The idea of re-usable "chunked" information is a concept I've unintentionally employed at different points in my life without realizing what I was doing. Single Sourcing and RoboHelp helped me move the concepts of modular writing from abstract to tangible in my mind. (Lavicka)

Although the combination of RoboHelp software with modular writing is less than ideal, I found the nature of writing help applications to be very similar to single sourcing a document set. And now my students are ready and eager to learn XML! They've discovered what so many technical writers discover every day—that software has its limitations, that often you cannot choose what software you use, and that putting theory into practice has frustrations too.
—Becky Jo McShane, Weber State University faculty

"Now my students are ready and eager to learn XML!"

Tools of the Trade

Templates

No matter what document design software we use, various different features increase productivity. One feature is templates.

Templates provide a standard to base our document on by providing size of page, header and footer styling, page numbering and section definition, typeface, headings, body text styling, and margins. Templates can also be used to define style of illustrations, captions, and how pictures and screenshots are used. It is always frustrating and time consuming for me to open a document only to realize I am typing in the wrong typeface for that document. The solution is to predefine the typefaces available and defaulted in each template. This can be done for even the most basic document. (Continued on page 4)

For example, a template provides consistency in displaying the identity of a company. At Helius, we have a specific “look” that includes predefinition of the following:

- Colors
- Typeface
- Heading styles
- Placement of logo and name
- Size of document
- Style of document (electronic, paper copy, web page)
- Header and Footer

Defining these up front and applying them to each document consistently allows the writer to focus on the design of the information and content.

I recently needed to provide posters that instruct customers on how to use features of our software. I drew on the current logo and styles for names, headers, and footers used in other documents to define the space in the poster. Once these were applied, I could see readily what space was left for my document information. I had predefined the color swatches loaded into my software, and easily applied them to design elements I added to the posters, resulting in a consistent look.

When changes are made to the image of a company, the use of templates makes it easier to make global changes to already defined documents. A template can be re-applied to any and all documents that were based on it. Recently, I had to change the color of the typeface on my CD-based documents. Once the color was changed in the template, I just re-applied the template and styles to my documents.

Using templates requires thought and planning as well as consistent application of the styles defined. Whatever document design program we are using, templates are a powerful tool to assure that we have the typefaces and paragraph styles as well as color and styles defined consistently and applied in all our documents.

—Susan McLain, Senior Technical Writer, Helius, Inc.

“Using templates requires thought and planning.”

Workplace

Is Web-based Training living up to our expectations?

Before I started my journey as a free-lance contractor, I was a part-time writer and mostly full-time teacher. I have taught languages and computer skills to students of all ages, kindergarten to college level. Most of the last ten years, however, I have enjoyed working as a technical writer and instructional designer, contracting with various large companies to write, edit, animate, test, and even deliver the company’s training materials.

In recent years, I have been privileged to participate in the following adult training scenarios:

- Instructor-led training where students are handed comprehensive training booklets and the teacher leads the training through a PowerPoint presentation
- Instructor-led training where students are handed a how-to training booklet and the teacher demonstrates how to use the target application via a laptop and projector
- Computer-based training and Web-based training (WBT) where individual students learn how to use an application while seated at their desks

In this article I offer my take on what seems to be working and what doesn’t seem to be working, at least not as well as business and training managers had hoped.

The eCorporation Push

As more and more companies strive to become 80%, 90%, or even 100% eCorporations, more emphasis is placed on remote training, or eLearning, as a natural part of the evolution. Although Learning Management System and Web-based training (WBT) software can be costly, in the long run this solution is less expensive than supporting instructor-led training in all branches of a company. Instead of having to pay per diem, plane fare, motel and rental car fees for George to fly across the country to train 20 accountants in Hoboken, how to use the new *Premier Data System (PDS)* database, George and his team remain
(Continued on page 5)

at the home office, build an online training course, upload it to the company intranet, and email those 20 people a URL. And best of all, George and his team can send the same URL to other accounting personnel in other branches of the company and soon everyone knows how to use *PDS*, which puts all the accounting folks in the company on the same page.

Thus, the major feat of delivering *PDS* training to remote locations is accomplished without the expensive overhead of sending George anywhere. Meanwhile, if any of the adult learners have questions about *PDS*, they can just open and read the online help.

This plan looks good on paper and usually shines in management meetings.

Adult Learners

The problem is, most adult learners, particularly middle-aged adult learners, need more human interaction than courses can provide. Researchers engaged in adult learning studies agree on the following:

- Adult education literature supports the idea that adults are mutual partners in the learning endeavor.
- Adults learn best when they are actively involved in their own learning.
- Adults learn best when those facilitating their learning demonstrate appreciation and respect for what adult learners already know and can do.

These statements are consistent with what I have observed in the corporate training world. In school, young learners tend to be motivated by completing something, rushing through the lessons and tests of an online training course, and then quickly moving on to something else. This also applies to young learners in the workplace.

“Research shows that the single greatest impediment to the success of Web-based training is a low completion rate.”

However, mature adult learners learn and retain much more through face-to-face training, where they can have any apprehensions about the training subject immediately assuaged, and where they can see the facial expressions of the teachers, pick up the non-verbal cues, and ask their questions right at the moment the question occurs to them.

Meeting those Training Goals

Naturally, the goal of any training session, whether in person or online, is for knowledge to be imparted from one person or group to another in a way that allows that knowledge to be retained and utilized. For most businesses, attached to this goal is the issue of cost, which is where WBT plays a large role.

Although WBT can save money over instructor-led training, research shows that the single greatest impediment to the success of Web-based training is a low completion rate. Some statistics show that it is not uncommon for large organizations to see a WBT completion rate of less than 10%. That means that the “solution” meant to train large numbers of people with one online training course results in less than 10% of the audience being trained. This is not a good outcome for the quarterly report.

One sure way to make certain that WBT succeeds is to bring people into a dedicated room during paid working hours for a dedicated period of time, and provide them with a skilled resource for demonstrations, help, motivation, and feedback. In other words WBT works best when it most closely simulates classroom training. If this is the case, then why bother with WBT? Why not save the course building costs and just send George on a plane to train those 20 folks in Hoboken?

Conclusion

I recognize that good reasons exist for choosing a full or partial WBT solution to meet corporate training needs. WBT can be a powerful tool in the right circumstances. I enjoy building WBT modules and have completed plenty of them, but experience tells me that online training is not a panacea. Sometimes it there just is no substitute for hard-copy booklets and classroom training.

—D. A. Gordon, Owner, Gordon Computers

You can see Ann’s Instructional Design Web site at: <http://instructionaldesign.gordoncomputer.com/>

Education

Writing consultants paired with university business classes

It seems that almost every month a new study reasserts the significance of college graduates' writing skills to their success in the workplace. For instance, the recent report of the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, entitled, "Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders," found that over half of the human resources directors of 64 major corporations frequently or almost always take writing into consideration when hiring and promoting salaried employees (p. 9, 15). Further, 86% of companies surveyed reported counting poorly written application materials against prospective employees (p. 10, Sept 2004). It is partly in response to employers' direct requests for graduates possessing strong writing ability that the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business conceived and implemented its new Business Writing Initiative.

The Business School aims to teach its graduates not only to produce clear, precise prose, but also to think critically, analyze issues from different perspectives, and make logical, well-supported arguments. In concert with the University Writing Program, within which I serve as coordinator of business writing, the Business School has taken a two-pronged approach.

First, a Business Writing course was developed. In contrast with the Professional Writing course geared toward all majors, the new course is devoted to business topics & genres. Students write intensively and are encouraged to revise their work. While collaborative composition has long been a trend in writing instruction, believed to prepare students for teamwork in the workplace, the Business Writing curriculum instead emphasizes individual projects, with the goal that all students be given the opportunity to practice all assignments, and weak students not be enabled to "hide" behind stronger group members. A video series that depicts community executives discussing their writing helps to reinforce the real-world value of the course's content and communicates the importance of workplace writing that statistics cannot convey.

Second, to reinforce principles learned in the Business Writing course, the Initiative has designated writing-intensive courses within the business major.

These courses represent an effort to emphasize writing as integral to students' chosen course of study, and not simply as an adjunct skill. Currently, there are two such courses offered within each of the four business majors (Accounting, Finance, Management, and Marketing). Although business professors are committed to the importance of written communication, their large class sizes often don't allow them to offer individual feedback on student writing; in addition, some professors feel they lack the expertise to teach and evaluate writing. To help alleviate these concerns, a Writing Consultant—a writing expert with teaching experience—assists with commenting on student work.

"These courses represent an effort to emphasize writing as integral to students' chosen course of study, and not simply as an adjunct skill."

So far, student satisfaction with the Initiative is high, and faculty members are supportive. Just beyond the pilot stage, the Writing Initiative will soon undertake a formalized assessment of students' writing abilities upon entrance to the major and at graduation. It is the goal of the Initiative that graduates successfully address workplace writing challenges—helping to ensure that our students are not weeded out by, but instead sought after for, their writing ability.

—Natalie Stillman-Webb, University of Utah Writing Program faculty

On Technology

Text Box for Life

In the middle of January, Salt Lake's *City Weekly* did something very brave: They announced in their publication they had made the switch to Adobe InDesign, the new(-ish) desktop publishing software that combines the functionality of PageMaker with Adobe's trademark usability. I applaud this announcement; I've made the switch too, only more gradually and because the software developers at the technology company I work for guffawed when I asked them if I should learn Quark. (Continued on page 7)

In my first job—if you could really call it that—after college, I worked for the Episcopal Bishop of California (long story). One of my few responsibilities was producing the biweekly “Bishop’s Newsletter” for clergy in the diocese—using Microsoft Publisher.

“In the professional world, I quickly learned that work cannot be done by Word alone.”

As a student, I had no computing needs that word-processing software couldn’t handle, but in the professional world I quickly learned that work cannot be done by Word alone. I needed something robust. I needed something versatile. I needed text boxes?

The Bishop and his staff figured that since I was one of those kids who grew up surrounded by computers, I no doubt had technology in my veins and, thus, no formal instruction in the ways of Publisher was needed. They failed to take into account that I was a Literature major in college, a fate from which my generational situation could not save me. I had no idea how to navigate technology, and Publisher, in particular, was a maze.

Namely, I couldn’t figure out why I needed text boxes. I desperately wanted to insert my clever repartee about the Bishop’s comings and goings directly onto the page, but Publisher wouldn’t let me unless I

first drew a silly little box. Again and again, I typed directly onto the page and nothing appeared. Yes, of course, I’d reminded myself, I need to draw a box first; I need to give my text a home on the page. Fast-forward several years and another technology-phobic degree in English later. Again I find myself confronted by the text box, the need to regulate text to a certain area of a page for the purposes of design and layout. This time, though, I embrace the little box. This time I’m using Adobe InDesign. This time everything makes sense.

Perhaps it’s the training in InDesign I received or the fact that it’s not a Microsoft product. Then again, there’s always the possibility that I’ve matured, that now, at the ripe old age of 27, I can accept the fact that text—the words and letters I’ve spent my life caring for—don’t have to be the focal point of a document. I can put a box around them and move ‘em anywhere I want to make room for a logo, a pie chart, a splash of color. It’s okay; as a technical writer, I know that nobody reads the text anyway. So I might as well box it up and ship it off to some remote corner of a document to make way for the more eye-catching graphic. InDesign lets me to do this easily, so easily in fact that I all but forget what I am doing to language.

—Hope Miller, *Communications Manager, Utah Interactive*

Contacts

2005 Executive Board and Advisory Council

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