

Turning User Experiences into Learning Experiences

By SAVITA TAYLOR, Senior Member

What do you do with a textile engineering degree when you don't want to be a textile engineer? My obscure engineering degree led me down a path to two technical communication careers.

With a solid technical education in one hand and a passion for writing in the other, I decided to become a technical writer after I graduated from college. My undergraduate degree helped immensely when I started my career, as I worked with engineers, and my technical knowledge allowed me to easily understand and translate information about turbines and electrical cabinets for my end users. Later, I completed a certificate program in technical writing that confirmed my interest in the discipline, and I went on to pursue a master's degree in technical communication. In graduate school, I learned skills, such as document design, that I could apply immediately at work. I was also introduced to instructional design, which at the time served as an interesting course that contributed to my general body of knowledge as a technical communicator.

Years later, I started applying my technical communication skills outside my full-time job as well. A firm believer in Maya Angelou's quote "when you learn, teach," I devel-

oped a technical writing course that I taught for a year at Georgetown University. I drew upon what I learned in my first instructional design class and wanted to learn more about the field.

I found myself following a familiar pattern as I transitioned to the next phase of my career. I completed a graduate certificate in e-learning and was again able to apply much of what I learned in school at work. After taking an Adobe Captivate course, I approached the CIO of the company where I worked at the time for a Captivate license. I created e-learning videos, as opposed to online documents, for two proprietary software applications. The response from the 15,000-plus user base was positive. As I implemented newly acquired teaching and learning strategies in preparing the company's trainers to teach online, I realized I was also ready for a change.

After months of searching, in May 2008 I landed a job as an instructional designer at Adayana Government Group, a consulting firm in Northern Virginia. I hit the ground running designing instructional strategies for an instructor-led training to web-based training course conversion for the US Air Force. The course was for software used to plan missions in




Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the software is also used by coalition forces, I got to meet members of the Royal Air Force when I took the classroom course in preparation for the conversion.

I enjoy managing multiple projects and producing work for a variety of audiences. Current projects have me visiting Marine Corps Base Quantico to consult with subject matter experts, writing narration scripts and knowledge check questions for American Red Cross communication processes, and editing client furnished information. In addition, I create course design plans and storyboards to tie course content together. The interactive nature of the courses requires going beyond just the text and graphics. I work with graphic designers and programmers to generate innovative design strategies, including unique ways to integrate Captivate and standalone Flash files.

I've taken advantage of Adayana's commitment to the professional development of its employees. Last year, I became a certified developer for the OutStart/EEDO ForceTen learning content manage-

ment system and completed a course in blended learning offered through the American Society for Training and Development. This spring, I will complete a master's degree program in instructional design.

I keep one foot in the technical writing world in various ways: I continue to use many of the same skills in my new profession, including writing clearly and concisely, organizing information in a logical manner, identifying appropriate graphics, and interviewing subject matter experts. I now teach a continuing education course in technical writing through the Fairfax County Public Schools Adult and Community Education program. I also maintain an active membership with STC.

A solid technical communication background can pave the way for many different career paths. For me, it has led to the world of instructional design. 

After working as a technical writer for a decade, Savita Taylor (staylor@adayana.com) is now an instructional designer with Adayana Government Group in Falls Church, VA. She holds an MS in technical and professional communication from Southern Polytechnic State University, and in May 2009 she will receive an MEd in instructional design and development from George Mason University.

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