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Editors’ Letter

FEATURES

MULTIMEDIA

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THE EVER-INCREASING USE and professionalization of new media, both in the workplace and in academia, by way of the synchronization and analysis and assessment of video, audio, picture, text, databases, mobile devices, higher quality printing, and other output and distribution tools is unmistakable. This demand for well-considered, well-integrated, and well-timed use of various media types in materials and projects is being mirrored by greater integration of media lab support spaces in communication, media, and technical communication programs.

In addition to reader, writer, and text, the modality and media used as well as the location in which content is received are crucial to any communicative act. The media used is central to: creating effective technical documents that are backed by relevant theory, analyzing and responding appropriately to rhetorical situations and varying audience agendas, user-centered approaches to technical communication, paying attention to ethical and professional and cultural issues, and effective composing today.

Just as good writing instruction needs sound support mechanisms like writing centers, faculty and students involved in the production of good new
media composing need the support of dynamic media lab spaces. Featured articles in this issue explore the role new media labs play in technical communication instruction, in knowledge-making in general, and as spaces promoting divergent thinking praxis for individual and collaborative work as well as for professional project management.

Specifically, as a director of a lab, I offer an article detailing ways in which new media labs are important instructional support spaces for every type of course in a technical communication program. Media labs “scaffold the work students and faculty do in order to build theory-supported, audience-driven content,” and the most useful labs are often built organically, directly integrated into the work of location in which they are situated. Put simply, “A new media lab is an intensely interactive and responsive support space.”

Geoffrey Sauer, a director of the lab at Iowa State, tells the story of the lab’s development and how it has become a sort of “incubator” for content. He points out why departments need such labs and what sort of physical and virtual space, hardware, software, networking, security, and expertise is needed. Media labs are affordable spaces. Media labs can bring synergy to ideas and, as Geoffrey writes, “multimedia labs are a place where we can begin to teach digital media to managers and instructors, as well as colleagues and students in this way, as skills and techniques, enabling people to practice comfortably if and when they wish.”

In an era of mass assessment and converging goals and objectives and mission statements, media labs offer students, faculty, and administrators support for meeting those needs through unique processes. Ben Lauren, an instructor at Florida International who is currently working with writing program colleagues to build a media lab, and who is studying the impact of media labs directly on writing programs, discusses the value of divergent thinking through media labs, which is a value central to the field of technical communication. As Ben reminds us, “Technology brings technical communicators the ability to make an idea unique—to stand out—to take an accessible shape or form as culture evolves.” He reminds us that the medium and the message is the message in our field.

Next, students from a recent class taught in Texas Tech’s new media lab carry this idea forward, describing the lab as a “messy mash-up space” central to their education. The class worked to produce social media and other materials for a client that markets eye-tracking technologies for usability testers. The intensive work in the media lab producing something real, backed by the theory of the course, became a sort of remix or mash-up, an approach students suggest is helpful in technical communication and rhetoric instruction in general. As they write, “it was in this space where lessons about collaboration, time and resource constraints, and working as a professional team became a window to understand how new media works in professional contexts.”

Regular columns in this issue also focus on strategies for drawing readers’ attention to key information using multimedia and important principles of information design.

There is nothing necessarily “new” about new media. The creation and distribution of any content is always based on audience, rhetorical aim, and available information. However, the economics of attention demands greater understanding of how the design and integration of new media types work to more effectively convey content. As practitioners demand these skill sets, academic programs must continue to better prepare students for such demands, and this includes developing necessary hands-on think tanks or media labs to support such preparation.

---Richard Rice
rich.rice@ttu.edu
New Media Labs
as Key Technical Communication
Instructional Support Spaces

By Rich Rice | Member
WRITING CENTERS PLAY very important roles in the academy, supporting writing processes from brainstorming ideas to researching evidence to bolstering claims to presenting final deliverables. Purdue’s Online Writing Lab, for instance, is one of the most well-used support tools available for writing instruction (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl). Similarly, media labs support multimodal, divergent, and iterative design composing processes. And the ever-increasing use of new media and emerging technologies for technical communicators in the workplace suggests that students are underprepared if technical communication instructional programs do not support the creation, design, and delivery of new media content and knowledge in integrated and systematic ways.

Media labs differ from writing centers in other ways, too. A media lab is an ongoing experiment both in terms of its hardware and software as well as the intellectual ideas it produces, retooling and reutilizing and rebuilding resources as it can to maximize client needs. The experiment includes teachers, students, administrators, resources, timelines, and intended or real audiences or clients. Innovation and the need to compose either proof-of-concept or production-quality deliverables is central to a media lab, often building knowledge through iterative recursion and the successes and failures of every project that makes use of the lab. That innovation often comes from the bottom up, as well, and is negotiated through feedback loops between theory and practice. In addition to pens, pencils, paper, and computers, one might find screwdrivers, duct tape, scanners, and mobile recording devices in a media lab. A media lab is purposefully messy that way, challenging people to find the right tools in the right amount used in just the right way to create and present a successful composition for a client or project. Chaos is embraced, disruptions incorporated, false starts recognized as iterative processes, bugs featured. In a media lab, digital technology crashes into media, recorded liveness, culture, rhetorical purpose, cost, time, and audience in order to explore ways in which a composition can impact society, afford communicative practices, invite interaction and reflective practices, promote collaborative learning that capitalizes on varied levels of expertise, maximize usability, and prioritize accessibility. A new media lab is an intensely interactive and responsive support space.

When we think about media labs as support spaces, we often look to notable models like the MIT Media Lab (www.media.mit.edu), the NYC Media Lab (www.nycmedialab.org), the UC San Diego Media Lab (http://mediaservices.ucsd.edu/web/medialab), Media Lab Helsinki (http://mlab.taik.fi), the UT Digital Media Production Labs (http://communication.utexas.edu/technology/dml), and the ISU Studio for New Media (http://newmedia.engl.iastate.edu). And we think of electronic performance support systems and facilities that are integrated with curriculum and content management. (See, for instance, Geoffrey Sauer’s compelling description of Iowa State’s Studio, “Multimedia Labs as Content Incubators,” elsewhere in this issue.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>New Media Lab Instructional Support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Technical Communication</td>
<td>Making use of various tools to support multiple genre creation in order to demonstrate that design and delivery can be as important as content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues in Composition</td>
<td>Emphasizing core composition concepts such as using and creating database technologies and digital video to compose and reflect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Criticism</td>
<td>Exploring qualitative analysis tools like NVivo and Atlas.ti to provide metadiscourse analysis, data management, and graphical representation of complex information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Writing</td>
<td>Using XML, CSS, and other advanced software tools to distribute reports in multiple formats and to represent content in optimal modalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Learning advanced peer-to-peer or group editing and revision tools and techniques with writing distribution and editing resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usability Testing</td>
<td>Creating client reports which incorporate video, statistics, interviews, observations, and other content in well-organized presentations and delivery modalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Design</td>
<td>Developing skills using Adobe Technical Communication Suite software and other web design products with extended and individualized support, maximizing software resources and divergent student praxis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical and Professional Editing</td>
<td>Editing documents and other genre using advanced editing tools and resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Instructional Materials</td>
<td>Scanning, PDFing, and using tools like RoboHelp, Camtasia, Captivate, and video editing to design user-centered and well-tested instructional design materials.</td>
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A new media lab is an intensely interactive and responsive support space.

Media labs are indeed incubators that foster multimedia production. They scaffold the work students and faculty do in order to build theory-supported, audience-driven content. A good media lab does not necessarily need to have a million-dollar annual budget, does not need the most state-of-the-art equipment, and does not take from the services offered elsewhere in the department. Like all things rhetorical, it needs to analyze the integrated teaching, research, service, and grant-writing praxis of its constituents, and it needs to develop a plan for creation, growth, and sustainability. If you’re thinking of creating a lab or working to sustain one in more developed ways, work to build in internal and external grant-writing and paid client projects into the mission of the lab, of course, and also think closely about the assignments teachers in your courses want and need to teach.

The list on the preceeding page and above describes a selection of undergraduate and graduate courses typically found in technical communication and rhetoric programs (see www.english.ttu.edu/tcr for longer lists). Consider ways in which new media labs as support spaces strengthen such courses in your program; consider ways in which students are underprepared for the academy or the workplace without such support.

Of course, much of the support for the work in these courses comes from the faculty who teach them and from professional journals and trade magazines and research students are required to do, but increased time-on-task using new media tools and small group collaboration and attention to software complexity outside of the course is needed to do quality work. For many students this attention requires a supportive “just-in-time” learning environment. A new media lab can serve as an excellent support mechanism for other courses, too, such as Foundations in Technical Communication, Information Design, Advanced Composition and Research, Ethics in Technical Communication, History of Rhetoric, Advanced Web Design, Interaction Design, Technical Reports of Manuals or editing, Online Publishing, Document Design, Empirical Research or Field Methods, and Writing for Publication. Think about the courses in your program and how a new media lab can help support assignments, goals, and objectives. Think about types of new media-rich assignments that could be taught with a new media lab supporting students and faculty.

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by Marc Prensky in 2002, argues that young people who have been raised immersed in digital media (“natives”) are naturally more comfortable and more capable with new media technologies than older users (“immigrants”) to the digital terrain (4). In my experience, this myth hampers both teaching and learning. Students use it to enable mediocre work—students often have a haphazard understanding of new media and sometimes assume their work is good before it is. Faculty and senior colleagues, on the other hand, often use the myth to justify their own limited digital skills and to justify not teaching digital technologies to students (who presumably already know them).

The New Media Consortium, in its 2011 Horizon Report, argues that digital media literacy continues its rise in importance as a key skill in every profession, but that the skills aren’t yet well defined or well taught (3). That claim is certainly supported by my experience as both a digital humanities professor and new media consultant. In this article, I’ll discuss briefly why a multimedia lab can help address the issue, then point out a few of the policies we’ve used and grants we’ve found to support our lab, the Iowa State University Studio for New Media.

One challenge of teaching new media is a widespread, pervasive belief in the myth of “digital natives” vs. “digital immigrants.” This stereotype, articulated by writers such as Marc Prensky in 2002, argues that young people who have been raised immersed in digital media (“natives”) are naturally more comfortable and more capable with new media technologies than older users (“immigrants”) to the digital terrain (4). In my experience, this myth hampers both teaching and learning. Students use it to enable mediocre work—students often have a haphazard understanding of new media and sometimes assume their work is good before it is. Faculty and senior colleagues, on the other hand, often use the myth to justify their own limited digital skills and to justify not teaching digital technologies to students (who presumably already know them).
The ISU Studio, then, was created as a venture to accomplish something similar, on a smaller scale: a comfortable place for small-group collaboration, with high-end computer technologies, not integrated into class assignments, where students, faculty, and staff could collaborate with one another, discover skills they didn’t yet know existed, and learn from each others’ discoveries.

**Why You Need a Studio**

Gone are the days when a single “webmaster” was responsible for all information posted to websites. This led to slowdowns that became frustrating for everyone. In the 2000s, content management systems began to enable more people to use templates, simplified “wiki” formatting, and easy browser-based editing. Users learned some of the larger aspects of writing for the Web by writing for the Web—while still not having to learn XHMTL/HTML5 coding, Web development in PHP, Python or Ruby, or SQL database design (coding work was done only by a select few CMS developers, often behind the scenes).

But Domenic Venuto of Razorfish wrote in 2009 that content management systems (CMSes) face unacceptably
high failure rates (3). Ann Rockley has reported the same (408). Although they draw different conclusions about the reasons, the problem seems most often to result from miscommunication between the people who develop a CMS and its end users.

We run a half-dozen content management systems in our department. Our solution is to “grow our own” developers within our own department. A popular solution in business in the early 2000s has been “growing your own” project leaders and managers. Organizations bring in people with moderate experience, then spend time teaching them, in-house, the skills needed to manage teams and departments. The ISU Studio attempts to emulate this method with new media production. Rather than outsourcing multimedia production to a few experts who have already mastered new media software, or keeping only one or two faculty with specialization in multimedia separate from the other instructors, we designed the ISU Studio to make it easy for every person in the department to add such skills to his or her repertoire.

Space
In the ISU Studio for New Media, we set up a room large enough for an eight-person meeting. We placed in it two high-end 12-core computers and a desk with connectors for users’ laptops. Then we installed prosumer equipment, largely funded through research grants. I’ll go through a few aspects to consider when creating your own studio, describing why we made some of the choices we did.

The room is organized for usability, user experience, and interaction design testing. Each of the two more powerful workstations can record motion screen captures at 1080p30, along with video of users’ faces, to DVD or Blu-Ray discs. The high-resolution projector can also be used for focus group or card-sorting exercises with teams of up to eight people. And the whiteboard recorder permits recording sketches in digital video formats with matching audio—perfect for recording brainstorming sessions or sharing them with online collaborators based elsewhere.

Fluorescent lights, widely used in older university and corporate offices for their energy efficiency, can distort the color in multimedia productions so that they look significantly discolored when viewed in home or natural lighting. So we’ve added new, inexpensive CFC floor lamps. They change the color of the room’s lighting significantly and make the Studio a more comfortable space to work.

Equipment
The room has a 1080p60 LCD projector, which projects to a wall painted to optimize color fidelity—that’s three times higher than the standard resolution of our campus projectors (which use 1024x768). We wired the room so that a switch allows any computer to use the projector (as well as the DVD duplicator, scanner, stereo, and SATA drive dock). This allows small groups to meet in the Studio and for any computer to “share” its screen. Multimedia production is often a small-group activity, and optimizing the Studio for collaborative projects has made multimedia projects more everyday to produce.

High-definition video capture or processing is seldom done without a RAID array (a collection of hard disks faster than a single drive). The Studio computers each have high-speed arrays for media capture from DVD, VHS, or any of twelve SD and HD camcorders available for checkout to anyone in the department. Projects, once captured, can then be moved to a larger local volume or a room media server (which is slower but useful for accessing work later from home or office computers).

The high-end workstations can be accessed from anywhere using the open-source protocol VNC (a free screen-sharing protocol which works on Linux, Mac OS, and Windows). With this, remote users can “poll” to ask if anyone is using either computer, and if not, take over one of the workstations from home. This is useful for queuing late-night corpus linguistics or video processing tasks.

Video compression is a CPU-intensive process. It takes fast computers and some time to process video-compression algorithms like H.264 (the video format used in Blu-Ray). We’ve set a computer in the Studio as our “grid master.” The other computers and a 16-computer lab upstairs have all been set as grid “agents.” This means that when we need to compress video, we can assign the task to the grid, and the job will be distributed among all computers idle at that particular moment. This can speed up processing by 5 to 15 times, enabling things like rendering video for streaming in a few minutes.

The Studio also has a range of outdated technologies connected to the workstations to facilitate transfer of older media to new digital formats. We are able to transfer legacy content from VHS, audiocassettes, Zip disks, and floppy disks into a form usable on computers today.

Security
We installed a six-digit digital lock on the door in a building that’s open 24/7. This enables people who work in the room to work mornings, days, evenings, or late nights, depending on their schedules—late evenings are surprisingly popular. We change the door code every few months, with the new code always accessible to logged-in members on the Studio website. Access to the room is limited to members only, but membership is open to anyone in the ISU community willing to undergo the orientation.

To minimize frustration sometimes involved with working in labs, the room’s computers are (mostly) unlocked. Unlike classroom labs where computers are locked to prevent users from installing new software and files are automatically deleted on logout, the computers in the Studio are unlocked so users may store project files for weeks at a time, install software, or adjust settings as needed.
We have master disk images of the computers, and if someone modifies a system in a way that interferes with reliable usage, we reserve the right to reinstall the standard configuration. But we haven’t needed to do this to fix an error since 2006. This openness instills in users a sense of responsibility to each other, and it teaches them about basic security concerns. It works surprisingly well.

How We Use It
Because the Studio culture has been built to be relatively informal, we’ve developed casual brown-bag workshops in which Studio members can display projects to other members and answer questions about the skills mastered in the process. Recent presentations include a multi-track DVD recording of a musical composed by a computer science graduate student, a presentation about plans to expand a campus learning management system that serves 550 courses per year, and a presentation about social networking tools being developed for the EServer Technical Communication Library (http://tc.eserver.org/). This is a good community-building exercise and has led to two ISU student clubs formed by students affiliated with the Studio—the Educational Video Interest Group and the Content Management Systems Club.

What Makes the Studio Affordable
“This sounds expensive,” you’re probably thinking. It’s certainly been time-consuming in labor to build, expand, and lead a group of 63 members. But I helped a consulting client recently develop a business case for a similar multimedia studio at their corporation, and as we worked through the arguments in its favor, I came to realize how affordable such a Studio could be when considered from a cost-benefit analysis.

When I began multimedia development, I found rarely used equipment scattered throughout individuals’ offices. A DVD-duplicating tower, for example, can be placed in a public Studio and will be used much more often than two or three bought separately by different projects, placed in individual faculty offices. Purchasing copies of Adobe CS Master Collection for all faculty didn’t make as much sense as putting two copies on the high-end workstations in the Studio (which actually have Blu-Ray recorders) and purchasing just CS Design Standard for faculty, then allowing anyone to work in the Studio whenever they wish. Having two high-quality scanners available to everyone, rather than twelve cheap ones in individuals’ offices, saves funds as well. These savings became noticeable sooner than we had expected.

We encourage faculty who write grant proposals that include multimedia tools to locate the equipment in the Studio. The National Science Foundation’s Guideline 6.B., which requires plans for the dissemination of findings to larger audiences, have led some faculty to plan Web strategies which have funded both software and hardware. The National Institute of Health has highly emphasized the dissemination of research in recent years, and the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Office of Digital Humanities is now among its most active offices. Studio members have worked with these agencies. All of these combined with grant funding from internal university sources have enabled the Studio to flourish, without needing any “regular” budget.

In 2009, I flew to Seattle to meet with representatives of the Motivara Foundation who were interested in assisting a few universities with implementing high-definition videoconferencing facilities to aid HCI collaboration across distances. The equipment from that grant has been very useful to our usability studies and collaborations with colleagues in several digital humanities initiatives.

To my knowledge, four studios elsewhere have been built based upon our model, consulting with us and using floor plans and wiring diagrams we post to the public in the spirit of open-source development (see http://newmedia.engl.iastate.edu/gallery/).

As you might imagine, I could write many stories about how our Studio has served as an incubator to foster multimedia production. But my point isn’t bragadocio—it’s to persuade readers that it’s actually possible today to enable multimodal production without requiring too-expensive equipment or experts. Our venture isn’t exceptional as much as it is an example that, with a bit of encouragement and usable space, multimodal production can flourish among technical communicators.

GEOFFREY SAUER earned his doctorate at Carnegie Mellon University. He joined STC in 2001 and has been on the faculty at Iowa State University since 2003, where he teaches new media development, technical communication, and film. He is the director of EServer.org, a nonprofit publishing venture which hosts sites such as the EServer Technical Communication Library. He is also the director of the ISU Studio for New Media, director of ISUComm Technology, and (in his spare time) runs a consulting firm, Sauer New Media Consulting.

REFERENCES
When I was in high school, my father routinely used me to validate his educational philosophies. He’d say, “How do you approach solving a problem?” and I’d answer, much to his satisfaction, “Find as many solutions as possible.” My father did not know it, but what he was advocating for was divergent thinking, the capacity to discover several solutions to a single problem.

I referred to this idea recently in a focus group on media labs when a participant said, “writing students shouldn’t be required to use any proprietary software.” The speaker went on to suggest that proprietary software is unnecessarily restrictive and might limit innovation, much like some multiple choice tests limit the possible correct answers a student can select. The debate about proprietary software aside, we all agreed that limiting the resources of a technical communicator frustrates innovation and limits the potential to see many solutions to a single communication problem.

With all the recent conversation about the benefits of technology and communication convergences, media labs that support technical communication educational programs continue to embrace divergent thinking models to enable innovation in a world where media standardization has quickly become a dull norm. Technology brings technical communicators the ability to make an idea unique—to stand out—to take an accessible shape or form as culture evolves. In contrast, convergent thinking, or seeking a single correct answer for a problem while setting aside other potential solutions, is a goal of many students searching for help in media labs.

To illustrate the importance of a divergent-thinking model, consider the following case studies demonstrating the failure and success of two students using a media lab. These stories are so common they are almost cliché, but they also demonstrate differences between divergent and convergent thinking models.

All I need is help! Help! Help is all I need!

A student came to the media lab with video footage and announced, “I need someone to edit this for me! Can you help?” Sitting down with him, I asked about the assignment and he explained he had to create an advertisement for a new skin-care product. He had filmed a young mother having a perfect day with her family. The day, he continued, would end with the main character applying the skin product to her face. He was not sure how to order...
the events, and he confessed he did not have a very clear understanding of video-editing software.

Before showing the student how the editing software functioned, I suggested he storyboard his ideas on paper. He reluctantly agreed, but asked, “How will this help me edit the video?” I explained that storyboarding would help him outline scenes, revealing potential directions and ways to work with the video captured, much like how an outline can make clear sections of a written essay. As he got started with the process, he realized he couldn’t create the storyboard because he wasn’t sure how the scenes should be arranged. He explained to me that he had not thought that far ahead. He was confused about his message for the ad, and he was uncertain how to proceed.

To show him there were many potential solutions, I suggested he use a technique known as mind mapping to help find connections between his ideas and the footage. A mind map is a common tool for facilitating divergent thinking because of its nonlinear approach to diagramming ideas. But he felt the clock ticking. He was not at the media lab to discover several solutions to his editing or message problems; he was there to find a single, workable solution so he could turn the assignment in on time. As soon as I explained the benefits of mind mapping he resisted and explained he didn’t have time for the approach and confessed he “came to the lab because someone told me you guys edit videos for people.” Frustrated, he got up and left.

In the media lab, divergent thinking is not always a simple, easy process. Oftentimes it is a murky and intriguing way of thinking through a project. While considering many potential solutions, technical communicators better understand their audience, purpose, the media options available, and their tools. To be clear, a divergent thinking model is not electronic schmoozery—it is a solution-focused method that without limit weighs potential avenues for completing a project deliberately and effectively. Yet, every project has constraints, which is why divergent thinking is most important at the beginning of the process rather than at the end.

**Radical Revision**

Asked to revise a paper using additional modalities, another student came to the lab with no idea how to proceed. Her goal for meeting with me was to explore ideas about how to “remediate” the essay. We read the essay together, thinking about the message and audience. The essay was a research document on the importance of immigration in a struggling economic climate. Some of the sources were interviews with local immigrants who contributed positively to the economy. Additionally, the student used data to show the positive impact of immigration on the local economy.

We started off by defining the audience for the revision, which led to brainstorming media outlets the audience most likely accessed. From there, the student left to do some additional research about the audience. Later during the week, the student reappeared with several ideas for revision. She discovered that the audience likely listened to talk radio, watched local nightly news, and read the newspaper either online or in print.

The student said she was considering creating a news broadcast that focused on immigration in bad economic times. She thought hosting it on YouTube might solve her problem of delivering the video to a broad audience. I suggested looking for examples to study, and as she searched, it became clear that there were too many ways to approach this one assignment—she felt overwhelmed by the possibilities. To move from abstract thought to concrete action, we tried to storyboard the newscast more than once, but we ran into issues of scope or audience that were unforeseen challenges in the approach. We needed additional thinking, exploring, and revision.

She eventually found a podcast special report on immigration issues, initially broadcast by a local radio station. She decided the podcast was an effective way to hear directly from her interviewees without revealing what they physically looked like, a concept she first discovered while storyboarding an earlier idea. She felt the podcast would also solve her delivery issue. She used equipment in the media lab to record her podcast and successfully finished the remediated revision of content for her essay.

While the process of thinking through this assignment was challenging, each solution during the process led to another potential solution. Divergent thinking allows for this mindset of exploration. A convergent-thinking model, on the other hand, creates a mindset of task completion and technology use without reflection.

**Considerations**

While divergent thinking can frustrate those already invested in a convergent model, an open process of discovery is key to developing usable and accessible communication, and media labs are ideally suited to focus on audience needs and media-type affordances. Furthermore, reflection is an essential component to learning and is an embedded characteristic of divergent-thinking models. Because technical communicators have so much technology available to them, experimentation with different ideas and platforms is part of the composing process—and should be. In the same way that iterative design calls for rapid prototyping and testing, media labs should consider working with students early on in a similar manner, encouraging reflection, revision, and learning.

**BEN LAUREN** (laurenb@fiu.edu) is the coordinator of the Digital Writing Studio at Florida International University where he teaches courses in technical communication and rhetorical theory. Currently he is working on his PhD in technical communication and rhetoric from Texas Tech University.
This article chronicles the experiences of ten students who met for a two-week intensive course in which professional deliverables were created for a client—Grinbath, LLC (inventors of EyeGuide eye-tracking technologies). The media lab became a location for “mashing up” technical communication and rhetoric theory and practice while working with real-world clients. It was in this space where lessons about collaboration, time and resource constraints, and working as a professional team became a window to understand how new media works in professional contexts.

IF THE PURPOSE of technical communication instruction is to provide future practitioners with a theoretical and practical foundation to engage in technical communication, how do we bridge academic theory with “real world” new media praxis? Today, technical communicators must not only be good writers; they must have a degree of new media literacy. Enter the new media lab. At Texas Tech University (TTU), the Multiple Literacy Lab (MuLL) provides a practical playground of sorts for students to use multimedia tools of the trade and to engage in technical communication, both theoretically and practically.
Mulling Things Over
Something special happens every May at Texas Tech: a two-week intensive seminar for the PhD program in Technical Communication and Rhetoric. Online students come to campus to work with faculty and onsite students. A course in new media this past May, taught by Dr. Rich Rice, met for four hours a day, six days a week. The class was asked to understand theories surrounding new media, learn tools needed to produce and revise new media in iterative design processes, work with a client to create new media for business and social media promotional use, and produce a class video documenting our experience. In all, we created ten deliverables in twelve class sessions, including a promotional video (http://tinyurl.com/3zalesj), a white paper (http://richrice.com/5365/Grinbath_EyeGuide.pdf), and a reflective video (http://tinyurl.com/3zbypup) tracing our process.

Although it is not much larger than a faculty office or seminar room, the MuLL includes six Mac and two Windows computers (all loaded with industry-standard software), handycams, a tape-to-DVD converter, DVD copiers, a color printer, laminating and binding machines, a plotter, and a myriad of other useful tools for new media production. In the middle of the room are a small round table and several chairs on wheels. Other students and faculty breeze in and out of the lab throughout the day to support their teaching, research, service, and grant writing. It’s a little cramped and a little chaotic—not unlike several professional workspaces—and it is through the “messiness” that we melded theory and practice. But the messiness engendered creativity as we challenged the limitations of our existing skill sets and negotiated task responsibilities among ourselves.

Audience-Driven Project Development
One primary question in the course that we asked, as graduate students and as future educators and practitioners, is: what about new media did we need to know? Does a technical communicator need to master Flash? HTML? CSS? Databases? Premiere? Our class came to the tentative consensus that we might not need to master an application, but we definitely needed to achieve literacy in new media theories and practices in order to inform the work we do. The MuLL was a practical playground in which we learned limitations and opportunities brought about by time and resources. We felt rushed—two weeks seemed too little time, yet in truth, our experiences mirrored the tight turnaround times required of many practitioners. While we actively encouraged each other to learn new skills, at times we had to scrap ambition and stick to accessible technologies and our proficiencies. Our goals included deliverables somewhere beyond proof-of-concept and perhaps a little less than production-studio quality, but they were well considered, well designed, and highly usable. Thus, although we might not claim to be new media experts, the MuLL and the experience of working with a real client under a tight deadline provided a realistic experience in navigating the limitations and possibilities of composing new media.

Newly Mediated Collaborative Practice
New media composition is collaborative. Behind every composition is a multitude of people with varied skill sets, and content producers of all sorts. The roles are fluid, the “author” is not just one person, and the audience collaborates toward a final product through iterative comments and “likes.” Thus, many authors provide input and all points of view are meshed.

Whereas the academy often still relies on old media models of practice and assessment, this new media model of producing content is fast, of high quality, and realistic. Most media is created collaboratively with a host of individuals who at times share/battle for/negotiate creative control. Our team had limited resources, worked on different elements of project deliverables simultaneously, and when we were in one another’s way, we divided tasks even further. Work could be done in other spaces, including in the field and our usability testing lab or library. Space and equipment had to be negotiated. Sometimes one team was unable to work on a project until other team projects were
completed, which again, is a feature more than a bug in this realistic, newly mediated, collaborative approach.

Much like a new media mash-up, the class broke the project components into pieces and then brought them together. We brainstormed edits, made cuts and additions to our modules, and spliced them into our final deliverables. Each piece has the stamp of individual creativity that is merged into a collective message. It was an iterative process that was chaotic and brilliant at that same time. We would start one project and then switch to another, and when the time was right, we returned to the previous project(112,280),(886,331) with new knowledge and content.

Inter-Class Collaboration as Systems Thinking

Working for and with a client was by far one of the most frustrating and motivating aspects of the project, but one supported well by new media lab spaces. Our work schedule was beyond our control because our client (Grinbath, LLC) was preparing to launch a new product. We also worked with students from two other seminar courses, Document Design and Usability Testing, collaborating on other deliverables for the company. Products included branding elements, such as the company and product logos, and usability tests documenting suggestions for improvement, subsequently making new product recommendations to the client. As the product itself was being further refined during this time, we had to be flexible in creating our deliverables. We collaborated between classes to exchange work, such as photo and logo files, and information about and from the client. Such inter-class collaboration is unusual in technical communication programs, but it is good preparation for content creation and sharing in the workplace, and it was necessary for working with our client. Our network included over 25 team members, forcing us to think like an integrated system. Still, we were not always able to get new deliverable versions from other classes in time to incorporate ideas into our own projects. And some members of the larger team continued working on deliverables even after the two weeks passed. This was a realistic workplace experience that is rare in traditional models of instruction.

The Final Mash-up Takeaway

The new media learning lab as a realistic technical communication production environment, as well as the service project integrated across multiple courses itself, is a sort of theoretical/practical and academic/workplace mash-up, afforded experiences that a traditional classroom could not. What are our most important lessons?

For effective collaboration, learning, and creativity is a messy process. Working through messiness is a learning opportunity. In tight spaces where resources are limited, chaos is unavoidable, but it can also inspire creativity. Many students expressed the wish for a clear project plan for each iteration. In retrospect, however, much of the learning and creativity came through processes of discovery, failure, recursive thinking, and redesign.

New media technologies provide possibility and limitation. Although we had access to many technologies, they did not always allow us to do everything we envisioned the client needed. At times, this forced us to be inventive. One group used one software program to get a desired video effect of a single clip that could be imported by another group into more user-friendly video software. The reality of working with new media is this: dream big, but if it fails, pull some of those big ideas into plans B, C, and D.

Primary accountability should be to the client. Being accountable to a professor and being accountable to a client are different things. Professors are responsible for creating and staying consistent to a schedule and project because, ultimately, course grades have to be submitted on time. Clients may change their minds and may be willing to delay for a better product. In our case, scheduling was often at the mercy of other players: the company, for furnishing us with necessary files; students in other classes, for completing their projects; and the clients again, for providing feedback.

Expertise should always be respected and negotiated. We can’t all be experts at everything. Learning how to give up control over a project to someone with more expertise is one of the most difficult things for each individual and his or her vision of the work. However, when working with a team, giving up control for the good of the final deliverable is necessary for success. This is an important lesson that can be learned from working in a new media lab. Functional new media literacy is crucial to every student of technical communication and rhetoric.

Through the meshing of varied experiences, equipment, technological literacy, and theoretical understanding developed in a new media lab, a class of ten students was able to succeed in delivering high-quality products to a client in a realistically short and intensive timeframe. The client used these deliverables to launch their eye-tracking products into the marketplace. The hands-on approach of new media lab learning helps prepare undergraduate and graduate students alike for the demands of the field. Understanding the various technologies our field uses and how those technologies are employed requires both theoretical and practical iterative training with such tools.

This article is derived from class wiki posts by May 2011, English 5365: “New Media” students: Chris Andrews, Andrea Beaudin*, Kate Crane*, Debbie Davis**, Lynn Ponder*, Elaine Ramziniski, Danielle Saad, Rhonda Stanton, Michael Trice, and Sandra Wheeler*, with Dr. Rich Rice leading the course. Primary authors of this article are Kate Crane and Andrea Beaudin.

(*Denotes STC Student Member; **Denotes STC Senior Member)
If you are interested in writing a script for a training video, this article provides you with the basics of writing a training video script and how to avoid some unpleasant surprises as you write your script.

“Good morning, good afternoon, good evening.” Bob greeted us as we joined our weekly conference call. We laughed. The greeting was funny but Bob was right. Our team was spread across three continents and we were in different time zones.

“Welcome Bob,” responded Sheela, our project coordinator. “Today, we’ll review lesson two. I’ll play the lesson two video now. Bob, do stop me if you have any comments or questions.”

“Sure,” said Bob. Bob was our client and liked to review the videos online. Sheela played the video and paused it when Bob said: “Hey, why is the narrator pronouncing PDSN as P D S N? That’s odd.”

“You are right, Bob. We’ll get this section recorded again.”

“Thanks, Sheela. A few more things before we move on. What you have covered in this section is technically correct. But you know what, these steps are basic and our engineers know them too well. Don’t demonstrate them. We are currently working at making this feature more user-friendly. I’ll inform you of the changes once they are finalized. Another thing. I know you are trying to make the narration interesting by having these characters. But I am not crazy about them. You may want to find some alternative way to go along with the narration. Please continue.”

My brain reeled. My script included conversations between characters. Now I would have to come up with an alternative style of narration and redo major chunks in the script. Bob had also mentioned that a feature would be updated. This meant updates in the demonstration and in the corresponding text. I needed a cup of coffee. On my way to the cafeteria, I bumped into my manager. “How is it going?” she asked. I told her about our client call. “Well, remember that this is a fixed-price contract. You still have three lessons to go and I expect you to be done with this project by the end of next month.”

Sound familiar? As scriptwriters, we often find ourselves in such situations. A video has several interrelated components, such as narration, onscreen text, animation, and demonstrations. A reviewer has a lot to comment on. This also means that when the reviewer wants any of these components to be changed, the script is usually affected. When there are many updates and the contract is fixed-priced, you are in a stressful situation.

Let me share with you some thoughts on what you must consider while writing a script. I’ll also tell you how to reduce updates to a script.

Visualizing the scenarios
Scriptwriting is a creative process; you visualize the scenarios for which you write. You need to think of the following elements:

- Images. Let’s say the video is about the history of architecture. What images should the video display when the narrator talks about the pre-Columbian architecture? What images should come up when the viewers learn about the Greek architecture? You need to think of these visual aspects.
- Narration style. For example, you may choose an unseen narrator talking to the viewers. Alternatively, you could...
unfold the history of architecture in the form of conversations between a group of students and their professor.

- Flow. For example, while writing about the different architectural styles, will you discuss them chronologically or geographically?
- Transitions. Unlike printed documents and online help, headings and subheadings don’t do much for videos. Appropriate narration and animation helps in leading your audience from one scenario or scene to another. Let’s suppose that while discussing the 17th century architecture in India, the narrator focuses on the Taj Mahal.

The narrator talks about the history of the Taj Mahal. As the viewers listen to how the emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal in the memory of his wife Mumtaj Mahal, the images of the emperor and the queen come up on the screen.

To move on to a discussion on the grandeur of the monument’s interior, the narrator says:

It took two decades to complete the Taj Mahal. Artisans from across India and from overseas were involved in building this masterpiece. Thousands of visitors from across the world visit this marble monument. Let’s go in to see what enthralls these visitors.

Ensuring that the theme and the application are frozen

In preparation for your script, you conducted elaborate research on the Taj Mahal and on the Mughal architecture. In the script, you discussed the nuances of the Mughal architecture and how the Taj Mahal is one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture.

You put together the various video components, such as the audio files and the images. When you showed the video to your client, he simply said: “Instead of the Mughal architecture, discuss the 17th century baroque architecture in Rome.” Imagine the rework you will have to do!

The same is true when you write scripts for applications, such as a finance product. A mid-way theme and application update can mean a lot of rework for you. It’s therefore better to ensure that these are frozen before you write the script.

Getting demonstrations approved

If a video involves demonstrations, get them approved by the client before writing the script. By showing the demonstrations to the client, you give the client an opportunity to see and comment on the procedures that you plan to cover. This way, there are less chances of the client asking you to update the demonstrations after you have written the script.

Noting down the changes in images

The updates in images usually have an impact on the script. Let’s say that your video began with a group of students listening to their professor as the narrator explained the history of the Taj Mahal. You wrote the script keeping these images in mind. When your client saw the video, he mentioned that he preferred the students conversing among themselves about the Taj Mahal. The client also mentioned that he would like to see the students standing inside the Taj Mahal from the very first slide. On receiving these inputs, your graphic designer will update the images. You too will have to update the script to sync with the new images.

Getting clarity on the fuzzy aspects

Certain sections are easier to write than others, for example, when your client tells you that a module is important but gives you no clue as to what should be covered in the module. In this situation, it’s best to jump in, write the outline, and present the outline to the client. The client may tear it apart, but at least you now know what the client wants or does not want. The more you postpone taking this initiative, the more you will feel pressure toward the end of the project.

Keeping track of recording schedules

Once the script is ready, you can either go for a machine or a human voice. Several software programs have a text-to-speech feature, which converts typewritten text to a spoken version. This machine voice is convenient, but often the voice sounds flat or robotic. Many clients prefer a human voice. When you opt for a human voice, however, you add another player to your team. It’s important to know the availability of a voice-over artist well in advance. I have seen cases when a voice-over artist becomes unavailable in the middle of a project. This leads to a search for a new artist and the re-recording of the earlier modules to maintain consistency in the voice.

Avoiding repetitions and getting the tone right

Viewers find it irritating when they have to listen to the same words repeated multiple times. As writers, when we explain demonstrations, we may be tempted to mention the location of actions. For example:

- In the color list, click Red.
- In the File menu, click Edit.

We also may think it necessary to mention the result of the actions. For example:

- The list appears.
- The color pane appears.

When we write the script for a video, we can skip mentioning the location and the result of our actions. Viewers can see what’s happening on the screen, so why mention them? By avoiding these references, we also reduce the repetitions and the length of the script.

We know that active voice in a sentence improves its readability. People also understand spoken words better when they are said in the active voice. But there are times when the passive voice is preferable. For example, in a video about a finance application, you are discussing error messages. Viewers may think that you are criticizing them if you say:
“When you make a duplicate entry in the expenses account, this message appears.”

You can avoid this tone by using the passive voice: “When a duplicate entry is made in the expenses account, this message appears.” You may also want to use the passive voice while discussing warnings and legal notices.

**Limiting the unending reviews**

Reviewers find it difficult to hold back when asked to give feedback on training videos. There is so much to critique—animation, onscreen text, script, the narrator’s pronunciation—the list goes on. You keep receiving inputs and seem to be endlessly working toward incorporating them, which hurts when the project is fixed-priced. How to strike a balance between achieving customer delight and remaining within the budget? One way is to plan ahead and minimize the need for additional review cycles. Maintaining a checklist helps. Your checklist might run as follows:

- Get the client’s approval on the demonstrations, transitions, and the narration style.
- Get clarity on the aspects you are not sure of.
- Where necessary, give the pronunciation-related instructions to the voice-over artist.
- Keep track of the voice-over artist’s schedule.
- Address client’s preferences.
- Update the script to sync with the changes in the animation.
- Incorporate the client’s inputs from the earlier review cycles.

Scriptwriting is a fascinating process. You write, keeping in mind the setting and the motion. Scriptwriters coordinate with the designer, the voice-over artist, and the client. Surprises may come your way, but knowing how to prevent them reduces the rough edges that you confront while on this road.

The author would like to thank Makarand Pandit for sharing his feedback on the draft.

**DR. PANKAJA KULABKAR**

(pankaja_kulabkar@persistent.co.in) has presented at the STC India Chapter and other forums. Pankaja won the STC India’s Best Essay Award in 2009. A researcher by training, Pankaja’s research took her to various parts of the globe. This exposure helps her in visualizing the audience as she writes.

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**“I’VE EARNED ALMOST A MILLION DOLLARS THROUGH CONNECTIONS I MADE THANKS TO STC!”**

One of my first contract gigs happened because I brought my resume to an STC meeting. I earned several other contracts over the years directly because of STC contacts made at meetings and the Summit. My last office job came because a fellow member knew her friend was looking for a writer and she recommended me. And my current book project is based on a suggestion made by a fellow STC committee member. STC has been an incredible resource for me for people, information, and especially jobs.

**MY NAME IS JOHN HEDTKE AND I’M AN STC MEMBER**

www.stc.org renew
STC Alumni Renewal Offer Expires Soon

STC RECENTLY ISSUED a special Alumni Renewal Offer to invite former members to rejoin. This offer expires 30 September.

STC has made great strides in recovering from financial trouble, and has a lot to offer that wasn’t available to many of the former members: a certification program, more online education, a new website and social network, online publications, a free education archive, and more.

In addition to what STC can offer, these alumni have a lot to offer STC and their profession as well. The more members in STC and the more experience those members have, the more STC and the profession can continue to grow and improve. The expertise of these former members can help STC continue to promote the profession.

If you know a former member who you think would benefit from returning, direct them to the banner on the STC home page that explains the offer and invites participation. And if you have a question, please email the membership department at membership@stc.org.

The Board and staff remain committed to advancing the profession and improving the Society. Thank you for the work you’ve all done and continue to do toward these goals.

Board of Directors Votes to Reduce Number of Directors

IN THE 21 JULY Board of Directors meeting, the Board voted to reduce the number of Directors from six to four, starting with the 2012 election. With this vote, there will be two Directors elected next year rather than four.

This vote continues a gradual change in the composition of the Board of Directors. A few years ago, the Board voted to eliminate the position of Second Vice President and two Director positions. The recent vote furthers the reduction in the size of the Board of Directors.

“A smaller Board allows for more streamlined and efficient discussion and decision-making,” explained STC President Hillary Hart. “There’s also a cost involved for each Board member (periodic travel), so there is a savings benefit attached to this decision as well.” She continued, “This reduction in the number of Directors enables more focused strategic planning while still representing the entire Society. And with the increased use of online technologies and social media, we can streamline the Board without reducing the quality of the Board’s discussions.”

The STC Bylaws state that the Board of Directors must have “no fewer than seven and no more than twelve individuals: five officers … and no fewer than two and no more than seven directors-at-large.”

Recruit New Members and Save On Your Dues

STARTING 1 OCTOBER, STC is once again running the Member Get a Member campaign. STC’s “Reach Out, Connect, and Recruit” Member Get a Member Campaign is really about you—the member. You understand the value of your STC membership better than anyone, and now is the perfect time to reach out to your professional contacts and recruit them to join STC. A large percentage of new members join STC simply because someone invited them. Reaching out and recruiting a member is easy when you find yourself interacting with colleagues at meetings, online, on the job, or while networking.

Every time you recruit a new member, you strengthen STC. A vital and growing STC membership means greater recognition of technical communicators, improved educational and networking opportunities for members, and the advancement of the profession. Why not reach out and share the same valuable opportunities with your colleagues?

Simply tell your colleagues how you have benefited from your membership in STC and suggest that they visit www.stc.org/membership to learn more about membership and to join.

And for a limited time, recruit a new member and get rewarded for your efforts! For every new member who lists your name when they join, you’ll get $10 off your 2012 membership dues, up to $50 off. This program runs through 15 January, so start the conversation now.

STC’s Member-Get-a-Member page (www.stc.org/mgam) has recruiting tips, sample emails to send to colleagues, talking points, and more. Talk to your colleagues about STC—they’ll thank you, and STC will thank you, too, with a lower bill for your own membership.
STC Releases 2010–2011 Salary Database

THE 2010–2011 EDITION of STC’s Salary Database (using 2010 data) is now available for purchase on www.stc.org. STC’s Salary Database is a tool that can be used to conduct more powerful job searches, make a strong case for a raise, prepare department payroll budgets, or estimate project costs. The data in the Salary Database are drawn from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics’ (BLS) Occupational Employment Statistics (OES).

As many STC members saw first-hand, 2010 was not a kind year to technical communication. Data in the Salary Database back that up, showing a net loss of over 2,000 technical writing jobs during the 12 months surveyed by the BLS.

But where were those jobs lost? And more importantly, where were the job gains—what industries and what geographic locations? Equally important to STC members, while the total number of technical writing jobs declined in 2010, overall average and median salaries actually rose. In what industries and regions were technical writers able to command higher wages despite a down market?

The STC Salary Database is an extremely useful tool whether you’re looking for a job, looking for a worker, or looking to bolster your request for a raise. Consider the following situations:

• A laid-off technical writer can use the Salary Database to find out the dozen-plus industries that added jobs last year, targeting her search in those areas. And with telework more prevalent, she can even search in the geographic areas where the most new jobs have been created.

• A manager wants to create a technical writing department but doesn’t know where to start. The Salary Database shows her both average and median salaries in her area, plus percentiles that allow her to prepare a budget that her supervisors approve.

• A freelance consultant is putting together a bid on a project. Using the Salary Database, the consultant can make intelligent estimates as to how much the project will cost him.

• Denied a raise last year, a technical writer comes armed with data from the Salary Database showing that the average salary in his industry is much higher for technical writers than for the more generic “writers and authors” his company had been using.

The Salary Database includes information on both annual and hourly wages, making it useful to both salaried employees and contractors, not to mention managers needing to offer fair wages to both. It includes salary information for 174 metropolitan areas, every state, and all 151 industries and industry subsectors that employed technical writers in the past two years. It provides three years of detailed wage and salary data.

Because the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics, from which the Salary Database was drawn, is one of the most referenced wage guides by human resource professionals, STC members who use this tool will benefit from the same market intelligence that is relied upon when employers evaluate raises and make salary offers to new hires. The STC Salary Database not only provides firm numbers to back up fair requests and fair offers, and gives technical communicators the insight they need in a tough job market, it also provides users with a competitive edge. Visit www.stc.org/publications/salary-database for more information or to purchase the 2010–2011 Salary Database.

Reminder of Deadlines for Awards and Honors

THE DEADLINES FOR NOMINATIONS for Associate Fellow, Fellow, the Jay R. Gould Award, and the Ken Rainey Award are upcoming. Please see the STC website, www.stc.org, for more information on these awards and honors or to find out how to nominate someone.

• Associate Fellow Recommendations: 17 October
• Fellow Nominations: 17 October
• Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication: 7 November
• Ken Rainey Award for Excellence in Research: 7 November
Multimedia as a Strategic Element of Information Architecture

BY ANDREA AMES | Fellow, and
ALYSON RILEY | Member

IN THE LAST ISSUE, we discussed social media in the context of strategic information architecture. In keeping with this issue’s theme, we’ll explore the strategic and architectural dimensions of multimedia.

Defining Multimedia

Before we begin, let’s be sure that we share a common understanding of “multimedia.” The etymology is simple: multi + media
- Multi, from the Latin multus, meaning “much” or “many”
- Media, the plural form of the Latin medium, meaning “an intervening agency, means, or instrument”

In our world, the medium is an intervening agency between our message or communication and our users—that is, the receivers of that message. The message or communication is our content, and back in the old days, we considered “print” (or physical/hardcopy) and “online” to be our two technical communication media or “intervening agencies.”

In reality, clearly defining “intervening agency” is not so easy. Many factors can intervene between the message (content) and receiver (user) not just the medium. Today, what typically comes to mind when we hear “multimedia” is one or more of the following:
- Text
- Audio
- Static images (either drawings or photographs)
- Moving images—a series of consecutive drawings or photographs presented in rapid succession to simulate natural movement

Any of these can be provided physically or online.

The implication of this terminology exercise is that the four “media” that we typically associate with “multimedia” (text, audio, still image, moving image) are simply presentation formats just like those we associate with information design, such as table, ordered list, and unordered list. (We don’t think that this is particularly controversial, but if you disagree, we look forward to your email.)

Why do we dissect the word “multimedia” and define it and related terms so extensively? Having a definition gives us a way to start relating “multimedia” to other concepts in the content development and information architecture environment, such as “content” and “navigation.” We also find the architectural approach implied in the definition. If multimedia is simply a presentation format, what does that mean for us as architects, designers, and writers of multimedia content? Is “video” the thing that I develop? Or is it “content that is best expressed in moving pictures”?

An IA’s Conceptual Model for Multimedia

Marlana Coe, in Human Factors for Technical Communicators, includes the concept of medium in her “human factors metaphor for technical communication” (3). Her metaphor depicts a user and her world as the center of concentric circles representing the content and several “intervening agencies” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Coe’s model.

The core idea in Coe’s model is that the user operates in her world, and our content comes to her in that context. Before she can access and understand the content, however, she must get through the “intervening agencies,” starting with medium (print or online), moving through navigation, then the presentation of the content, and finally getting to the content itself.

We suggest that today’s model looks more like this:
“Content” is our message—the pure idea that we’re trying to communicate. “Presentation” is the form, format, or design of that message—a visual, aural, or textual representation or presentation of the idea. “Delivery mechanism” (or deliverable) is the method by which we deliver that message in the chosen form or format—the book, video, podcast, diagram, Help system, etc., each of which falls into one of two categories: physical/hardcopy or online (some fall only into one or the other; others can be provided in either). “Navigation” is the means by which we access the deliverable—search, browse, etc. and is typified by one or more navigation mechanisms, such as tables of content, navigation trees, tag clouds, search engines, etc.

In other words, a delivery mechanism might be a book, which could be printed, that contains multiple presentation formats or designs of the information, including text, static images, and moving images (remember the flip book? Google it!). Another deliverable might be a product demo on YouTube (putting it in the “online” category) that contains multiple presentation formats, including static and moving images and audio.

Differences between the models might appear subtle, but the impact of those differences is significant in the resulting information experience. For example, worrying about “online” vs. “print” from a delivery perspective (Coe’s definition of “medium”) is barely a blip on the modern IA’s radar. It’s pretty clear that in my effort to get to content:

1. I first have to find it (navigation)
2. I then have to understand how to use the mechanism by which it’s delivered to me (this might be very easy for common mechanisms like books or more difficult for mechanisms that the user is not familiar with)
3. When I finally get to see the content itself, I first have to parse the presentation of it and determine what those presentation choices are telling me about the content (if I’m seeing an ordered list, for example, I might assume that I’m looking at task information)
4. Now I can read the words, watch the moving pictures, listen to the audio, etc., and hopefully easily understand the messages in the content

And all of these “intervening agencies,” as well as the order in which the user encounters them, must be considered by you, the IA, when designing your content.

An IA’s Guide to Multimedia
Here are some considerations for designing multimedia into our customers’ (or our clients’ customers’) information experiences.

Content is king. Always. It doesn’t matter what the presentation format is. Consider your messages first.

What is the best way to present your message? It might be a table or a still image. It might be an ordered list.

Will my users need to refer to it? Some presentation formats do not lend themselves to reference. In other words, how will the user find that three-minute explanation that is buried in your video or podcast? And if you have to provide it elsewhere for reference, what is the added value of the audio or moving-image version? Is that added value worth the development and maintenance resource required?

Will my users be able to add value to it? In our last column, we discussed the ways that additional content contributed by users through social media can add value to your original content and keep it fresh; this is true of traditional text content and multimedia content. Consider opportunities for encouraging the growth of social content around your multimedia content. Can your users readily rate, comment, discuss, share, like, and link to your multimedia content?

Will it need to be translated or made accessible? If so, you might have to provide several recordings or voice-overs in different languages, or a text version that a screen reader can decipher. Depending on your resources, this could be a deal breaker. Don’t forget about maintenance. If you change anything, you’ll have to re-record all of your audio and update the text script.

Be proactive. Models are an architect’s best friends. If you’re getting a lot of requests and demands from marketing, R&D, or other groups to produce multimedia and trying to balance those requests against some pushback from your technical communication team—or if you and your team are pushing for multimedia but your company is reluctant to invest—there are some practical actions you can take. Define the ways in which you, your team, your organization, your company will use various presentation formats and get agreement from all your stakeholders. Develop a model that prescribes what kinds of content get delivered in what delivery vehicle and presentation method. Be sure your model considers the types of content, such as product overviews, concepts, tasks, etc., as well as delivery mechanisms, navigation, and development and maintenance resources.

Keep it real. Everyone uses multimedia, and everyone has...
opinions about it. You must involve your users in order to tease out reality from individual perceptions. Once you’ve developed your multimedia model, validate it with real users of your content using real examples of content and in real-world situations. Users may tell you that they want to listen to a technical podcast while riding their bike; in reality, however, it may be hard for them to retain complex technical information delivered only in an auditory format. Using real content and observing users in real-world working contexts will provide you with the reliable data you need to create a solid architectural model that includes multimedia presentation.

Teach your team. We suspect that your writers typically “design” your information—that is, decide whether bulleted lists or tables are appropriate for specific kinds of messages. If so, you need that multimedia model even more. Create it, get buy-in for it, and use it to teach your team to appropriately select presentation types like moving images or audio.

Measure your impact. If you’re incorporating multimedia for the first time, establish a set of metrics that will allow you to weigh your impact, pre- and post-implementation. If you’re looking for tools to convince your colleagues on the financial side of the house to fund multimedia development, find ways to measure the ROI of multimedia against that of traditional static text—think about things like mindshare (including social capital metrics such as number of views, shares, likes, etc.), time to value (including metrics such as speed of comprehension, speed of task completion, etc.), and customer satisfaction.

And the Pressure’s On …

If you’re like us, you’re getting a lot of pressure to incorporate “movies” or “videos” in your information strategies and content. These requests are coming in from all sides: development, marketing, support, etc. And the pressure can come from a lot of places—from the desire to participate in social media or the need to manage one’s brand in current high-impact venues such as YouTube. However, this pressure can also come from an old, old problem, one that IAs have faced before: the “fix it in the doc” approach of years gone by. Yikes!

No matter your work context, most IAs today are pressured to incorporate multimedia content into their information strategies. And while we’re all feeling the pressure, we observe that it’s especially intense for those IAs who are working with product documentation. It’s that particular context and the “fix it in the doc” pressure that we want to explore a little further.

Let’s consider video as an example. YouTube is cheap and easy and plentiful, and a little exploration reveals that it contains a plethora of technical product movies, including demos by real people showing other real people how to use products in real-world contexts. You can find this “third-party documentation” at Amazon.com and in other product-selling contexts as well. Add to this situation the exponential effect of social media, and you might see an explosion of this kind of information describing your product.

Our extended, cross-functional teams see and experience this phenomenon for themselves in their everyday lives, and many believe it to be the “solution” to many of the documentation challenges (dare we say problems?) with which IAs wrestle. The reality is that if we don’t understand the real-world contexts in which real people use our products, the moving-image information that we produce will be as flawed as our text documentation.

And creating poor-quality moving images is far more expensive than creating poor-quality text, compounded even further by adding audio to the equation. We often hear the argument that people without corporate resources are creating and publishing videos of “acceptable” quality—so how can it be that costly?

If we’re providing that video content as private citizens, that’s a fine argument. Most of our companies or clients, however, are liable for the content that we produce and publish under their auspices. There are legal implications of this kind of warranted content, and we must take the same level of care when ensuring the quality of video content as we do with text. In our experience, poor-quality video is more obvious to viewers than poor-quality text is. And poor-quality video can damage a company or product’s reputation much more quickly and easily than the same level of quality in text.

For IAs, this means that we must understand the root causes of the requests for this kind of information and not just react to these requests to spec multimedia as a cure-all. It also means that the time-tested technique of focusing on the user, her goals and tasks, her work context, and her information needs will give us the tools we need to work with multimedia in a high-value manner. This is true of any demand for specific content, presentation format, delivery mechanism, or navigation approach. The sum of these “intervening agents” equals the information experience, for which we professional IAs must take responsibility and own. Always consider first your users, the root cause of the problem you are trying to solve for them, and the best way to solve that problem—content first, then presentation, delivery mechanism, and navigation.

Acknowledgments

We’d like to thank Jennifer Fell, information architect and client technical sales professional at IBM, who has contributed greatly to our thoughts and assertions about multimedia in IA.

ANDREA AMES and ALYSON RILEY are veteran, strategic information architects with over 35 years of combined IA experience ranging from large enterprises to small start-ups and from commercial to public-sector/government to academic environments.
Give Them a Firm Foundation

One of the fundamental things we’ve learned from research on memory is that it works best when we build connections with what someone already knows. Designing effective information therefore requires us to think about what our audience already knows (their mental models, often referred to as schemata) so we can build on that foundation. Where audience members entirely lack a foundation on which to build or have an inadequate foundation, we must find ways to build one for them so they’ll have a framework in which they can absorb new information. We can do this in a variety of ways, but starting with an overview that clarifies the context and its relationship to their goals is a great start. Once our audience knows why they’re consulting our information, they’re prepared to receive information that supports them in that context.

Understand Your Audience

One of the technical communicator’s mantras is the need to understand our audience, and nowhere is this more important than in information design. Understanding an audience starts with defining their needs: the reasons why they’re examining the information we’ve designed. When we do this, we must remember that the audience has overall goals that lead them to consult the information we produce; writers often wrongly assume that the information itself is the goal. Instead, we must design information downward from these goals toward the lower-level tasks that let them accomplish those goals. One fundamental failing of most documentation I use is that it provides good task-level information but ineffective or wholly inadequate support for understanding how the tasks fit together. This is an egregious example of focusing on tasks rather than the audience’s goals.

Effective information design is more than goals, however. It relies on a profound understanding of the psychological, cultural, and other factors that affect how well an audience can perceive and understand what we’ve created. Knowledge of the limits imposed by human biology and psychology helps us focus on designing solutions that help the audience overcome those limitations. We can learn about these limits by reading about cognitive and psychological factors, such as Miller’s “mythical, magical number 7” (Intercom, April 2006).

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Principles of Information Design

This column focuses on the principles of information design, the art and science of understanding how humans process and comprehend information, and using that knowledge to develop more effective ways to communicate. Please send comments to ghart@videotron.ca.

Sadly, the time has come to say farewell, and this will be the final installment of my column on information design. In this article, I’ll try to summarize the principles that underlie what I’ve written about during the past five years, spanning more than 20 articles in Intercom since 2006.
Understanding their context also lets us provide a road map that reveals how all the pieces of information fit together to create an integrated whole. This can be something as simple as a table of contents, which makes the structure of a document explicit, or as complex as hyperlinks and other forms of cross-reference. Somewhere in between is the practice of using “breadcrumbs” (Intercom, November 2007), which show the full path someone has taken to reach the current chunk of information; if the headings at each level of the hierarchy are clear, the breadcrumbs both explicitly reveal the structure of the overall body of information and provide quick access to related topics at the same or higher levels of the hierarchy.

**Provide the Right Information**

A successful information design is complete; that is, it contains all the information readers are likely to need, and where we cannot provide that information, it provides references that can. The documentation for most publishing software effectively describes how to use the tools but omits high-level details such as the rudiments of typography and interaction design. As a result, those who use the tools often create technology solutions that completely fail to meet the needs of their users—which is why I’ve described many websites based on Flash as “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” (We must never forget that our audience has limits on the amount of information they can process simultaneously, and that we should never overwhelm that capacity.) You can’t provide complete information if you start by asking what your tools can do; a design only works when you first ask what people need, and only then decide which of the available tools can meet those needs.

Defining the correct amount and level of information also relies on an understanding of the level of abstraction that is most appropriate for each goal. Text and graphics can both span the spectrum from the highly abstract, such as graphic design principles, to the highly concrete, such as the tools used to create a given design. In many cases (perhaps most), we must help our audience move from the abstract to the concrete: the former provides context and a framework in which to work, whereas the latter shows how to apply that abstract knowledge to achieve goals. Most modern documentation succeeds on a concrete level (i.e., at the level of individual tasks = the what and how), but fails at an abstract level (i.e., provides no indication of how a given task fits within the overall path to accomplishing a goal = the why and when).

**Balance Graphics with Text**

Although we’re increasingly offered new communication tools (e.g., sound and interactions (e.g., iPad-style gestures), most information designs focus on two traditional tools: text and graphics. Text has very clear rules, codified in grammar and style manuals, and mastering those rules is not just a task for editors; the same tools are what let writers communicate clearly. Such rules also exist for graphics but have not been codified in the equivalent of a grammar guide (despite efforts by luminaries such as Jacques Bertin). Neophyte designers must thus seek knowledge in many places and assemble the necessary information themselves. I’ve tried to help by describing the basic visual tools: visual vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric; the importance of white space; and how the components of pages and screens of information function.

Understanding these concepts lets us think through a design based on principles that take advantage of the relative strengths of text and graphics, thereby letting us combine them in a way that effectively meets the audience’s needs. In three Intercom articles (July/August 2008, December 2008, and February 2009), I applied this thought process to illustrate the fundamental rules of page layout and typography, slipping in a hearty dose of theory in the guise of practical information. In the December 2010 Intercom, I built on this background to show how understanding the relative strengths and weaknesses of graphics and text lets us combine the two media effectively to solve a communication challenge.

**Remember Your Reality Check**

My design philosophy is that theory should always inform the thought process but never replace it. Thus, I’ve tried to overcome the aversion most non-academic members of STC have toward theory by presenting the theory in highly pragmatic terms. The enormous body of research on cognitive science can dramatically improve our work as information designers. Whether information design fascinates you as an intellectual challenge or simply as a practical tool for your job, I encourage you to expose yourself to this research. Research provides many rules of thumb to guide us, but we can only use those rules effectively if we understand why they work—and perhaps more importantly, *when they might fail to work.* In the September/October 2010 Intercom, I illustrated how to apply theory to a specific design challenge, and also how to know when you’ve gone too far and need to subject the theory to a reality check.

In my two penultimate articles, I discussed how you can train yourself to become better at anything, including information design, and how the same approach can be used to help your audience improve their skills. Focused practice is a great way to improve your design skills and start making your audience’s life much easier. In a very real sense, that’s been my primary goal in this column: trying to give you the tools you need to understand the challenges of information design and to apply that understanding to solve real-world problems. I hope that along the way, I’ve helped you share some of my love of information design and inspired you to learn more. It’s been a pleasure over the years chatting with many of you about what I’ve written, and I hope that dialogue will continue in the future.
1. Brand Yourself

Most buying habits are based on brand recognition: We recognize and respect good brands. When Amazon.com “lost” a $25 gift card payment on a recent order, I called and led with the “brand” card: “I’ve been a loyal customer for 12 years,” and my account was credited within minutes.

Thinking about brands reminded me of a classic book on my shelf, *The Brand You 50: Fifty Ways To Transform Yourself From An “Employer” Into a Brand That Shouts Distinction, Commitment, and Passion*, by Tom Peters. Despite its long title, it is a simple and clear introduction to branding that will help you understand why the corporate construct of brand might apply to independents and solopreneurs.

Peters defines a brand as a “trust mark…. It’s shorthand. It’s a sorting device” (25). Branding is the subtle interweaving of business qualities with your name, logo, tagline, and all communication. Branding is about market perception based on emotion and defined in your customers’ minds by their experience with you and your service.

Once you have established your brand, hire a branding consultant/graphic designer if possible so that your outward communications will be logically and consistently branded. Potential branded communication elements include letterhead, postcards, envelopes, business cards, brochures/flyers, websites, email signatures, thank-you cards, “nice to meet you” cards, fax cover sheets, mailing labels, invoice templates, marketing slide shows, LinkedIn elements, newsletters, give-away promotional items, signage, and elevator speeches. Many of these elements will be covered in this and later columns.

I, too, hate marketing; I would rather do anything else than “brag on myself” (my family and teachers inveighed against self-promotion when I was young). Yet a commitment to independence is a commitment to marketing.

Since all endeavors are more palatable if you make them fun, I invite you to play Marketing Bingo©! Download your card at www.textdoctor.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Marketing-Bingo2.pdf and start developing a coherent marketing plan. We will discuss all the bingo squares in four “Business Matters” columns. If you will consider using each tactic as part of your marketing plan, you will better understand your marketing options and be able to implement your plan.

By Elizabeth (Bette) Frick | Fellow

In my 21 continuous years of solopreneurship, I have watched friends and colleagues start their own technical communication business but eventually go back to full-time employment. These were skilled practitioners and very bright people who hated marketing themselves, so they avoided creating and implementing a marketing plan.

This column explores the joys and challenges of managing your own technical communication business. Please share your experience and ideas. Contact Bette Frick at efrick@textdoctor.com.
Of course, if you are just starting out, it may be tough for you to develop your own concept of your brand. The exercise of branding will help you to define and focus your business. You already have a brand, even if you aren’t consciously aware of it. Make sure you are optimizing your brand for your own benefit.

2. Business Cards
When you first start out, it may be necessary to design and print your cards yourself on your laser printer. While your business focus evolves, it may be wise to print only a few cards at a time. Once you are more stable in your vision and have firmly established your brand, consider investing in a professional designer. Online printing companies offer templates you can use as an alternative to professional graphic design. Large office supply stores also allow you to design your own card. Pay for the best quality design and printing you can afford. It’s the first impression you make on a potential client or associate.

Consider using the back of your business card to explain your services or accomplishments that may not be immediately intuitive to a new contact. I list my seven service lines on the back of my card so that I can highlight a particular service that might interest a potential client. I’ve left plenty of white space for writing.

Always carry your business cards with you (in your purse, briefcase, car, and even your gym bag).

3. Brochures
Brochures are one step up from a business card. The advent of easy-to-use publishing software makes it easier to create good-looking, well-designed marketing collateral ourselves, but I still use my graphic artist (and my editor) to help professionalize my brochure. I store it on my website so visitors can download it easily.

Consider designing the outside of your brochure in color and the inside in black and white (one page of color can cost up to six times what black and white costs to print). Just as you should always carry your business card with you, also carry your brochures protected in a folder or plastic cover.

4. Listings on Websites
Listing yourself on websites or in paper directories is the equivalent of putting up a virtual or print sign, and it’s so much easier. Many professional organizations maintain a database of members who choose to list themselves publicly. I have been contacted through such listings and have been able to convert those to contracts that greatly exceed the amount I paid to belong to the organization (BINGO!). Of course, if you have a website or a LinkedIn account, search engines provide a de facto global listing.

5. Promotional Give-Aways
Open your desk drawer and pull out all the promotional give-aways you have collected over the years: pens, highlighters, Post-it notes, letter openers. We all have many items with someone else’s name on them. I’ve had a lot of fun with this time-honored tactic.

I give two promotional gifts in my technical writing classes. The first is a $1 branded highlighter. Often I’ll ask training participants to highlight a section on a page, and if they have not brought a highlighter to class, BINGO! They now have a useful tool to take away, with my contact information.

The second item is a $2 branded folding ruler. Because most adults have a hard time holding still in class, I encourage them to play with the ruler as their fidgeting aid. We also use the rulers as a tool in a proofreading exercise (putting the ruler under the line being proofed to isolate that text and discourage jumping ahead). No one EVER leaves a ruler on the table when they leave class at the end of the day.

You must understand your target market well enough to know exactly what would excite them in terms of small promotional gifts—find the best quality you can afford, brand it, and give it freely. Remember to carry your promotional gifts with you at all times.

6. Direct Mail
The United States Postal Service claims that direct mail is a $900 billion industry (in Colorado, where I live, the postmaster says direct mail is worth $9.2 billion and affects 150,000 jobs). Direct mail has been very productive for me in maintaining my existing customer base and in uncovering new clients. I encourage you to consider direct mail as a potential tactic for the following:

1. Keeping in touch with longer-term prospects and keeping yourself top-of-mind when they get ready to “buy” services.
2. Announcing a new award, service line, or product.
3. Passing on your change of address, change of name, or an updated website.
4. Driving prospects to your website. Always send mail first class with attractive stamps because mail with first-class postage will be opened at a higher rate than metered mail, and wrong-address returns are guaranteed. Consider writing a note or signing each piece if possible. Try mailing different pieces in a “drip campaign” about 2 weeks apart, then phone these potential clients after all items in the campaign have been delivered.

In Part 2 of this column, I’ll write about newsletters, signage, websites, social media, employing agents/recruiters, and the elevator pitch.

Yes, marketing is a lot of hard work. But then, so is starvation.

ELIZABETH (BETTE) FRICK, the Text Doctor® (efrick@textdoctort.com), teaches technical and business writing in companies and organizations nationally and edits medical documents. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Minnesota and is board-certified as a medical editor by the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences.
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<th>Date</th>
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<td>7–12 Oct</td>
<td>The American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&amp;T) will hold its Annual Meeting, with a theme of “Bridging the Gulf: Communication and Information in Society, Technology, and Work,” at the Marriott New Orleans in New Orleans, LA. For more information, contact: ASIS&amp;T <a href="mailto:asis@asis.org">asis@asis.org</a> <a href="http://www.asis.org/asis2011/am11cfp.html">www.asis.org/asis2011/am11cfp.html</a></td>
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<td>15–18 Oct</td>
<td>Join the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) for their 2011 International Conference, taking place in Orlando, FL. For more information, contact: PRSA +1 (800) 350-0111 <a href="http://www.prsa.org/Conferences/InternationalConference/index.html">www.prsa.org/Conferences/InternationalConference/index.html</a></td>
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<td>17–19 Oct</td>
<td>The Professional Communication Society (PCS) of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) will hold its 2011 Professional Communication Conference: Communicating Sustainability at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio. For more information, contact: PCS <a href="http://ewb.ieee.org/soc/pcs/index.php?q=node/1771">http://ewb.ieee.org/soc/pcs/index.php?q=node/1771</a></td>
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<td>20–22 Oct</td>
<td>The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) will hold its 71st annual conference, “Writing Our Future,” in Jacksonville, FL. For more information, contact: AMWA +1 (301) 294-5303 <a href="mailto:amwa@amwa.org">amwa@amwa.org</a> <a href="http://www.amwa.org/default.asp?id=535">www.amwa.org/default.asp?id=535</a></td>
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<td>26–29 Oct</td>
<td>The American Translators Association (ATA) will hold its 52nd annual conference at Marriott Copley Place in Boston, MA. For more information, contact: ATA +1 (617) 663-8100 <a href="mailto:ata@atanet.org">ata@atanet.org</a> <a href="http://www.atanet.org/conf/2011/">www.atanet.org/conf/2011/</a></td>
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<td>8–12 Nov</td>
<td>The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) is holding the 2011 AECT International Convention, “Celebrate 3.0: Design.Learn.Community,” at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront in Jacksonville, FL. For more information, contact: AECT +1 (877) 677-AECT <a href="mailto:aect@aect.org">aect@aect.org</a> <a href="http://www.aect.org/events/jacksonville/">www.aect.org/events/jacksonville/</a></td>
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<td>16–20 Feb</td>
<td>The 2012 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Meeting, with a theme of “Flattening the World: Building a Global Knowledge Society,” takes place in Vancouver, BC, Canada. For more information, please contact: AAAS +1 (202) 326-6450 <a href="mailto:meetings@aaas.org">meetings@aaas.org</a> <a href="http://www.aaas.org/meetings">www.aaas.org/meetings</a></td>
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<td>19–21 Apr</td>
<td>The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference at the Bahia Resort in San Diego, CA. For more information, contact: ASI <a href="mailto:conference@asiindexing.org">conference@asiindexing.org</a> <a href="http://www.asiindexing.org/">www.asiindexing.org/</a></td>
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<td>21–25 Mar</td>
<td>The American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&amp;T) will hold the IA Summit at the Hyatt Regency in New Orleans, LA. For more information, contact: ASIS&amp;T <a href="mailto:asis@asis.org">asis@asis.org</a> <a href="http://2012.iasummit.org/">http://2012.iasummit.org/</a></td>
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F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to intercom@stc.org.
The Egg Came First

BY ERNIE MAZZATENITA | Fellow

HERE’S HOW I almost got started with my career. Return with me, reader, to the early 1950s ... to a journalism classroom at Kent State University in Ohio. I was in my junior year taking a business journalism course. It was the first such course I had ever taken, after a steady diet of courses stressing writing and editing for newspapers.

At that time, like most of my classmates, I was eager to begin writing for a newspaper. I didn’t think a business journalism course was central to my needs. A major course project required us to contact a business publication, request issues, and then write an analytical report on the publication.

Since I was less than excited about this assignment, I decided to look for a publication with a funny title. So did many of my classmates. The one title that appealed most to my perverse sense of humor was *The Egg and Poultry Journal*. As funny as I thought that was, a like-minded classmate outdid me; he picked *The Pit and Quarry Handbook*. When we announced these titles, the entire classroom erupted in laughter. After all, we were all looking forward to careers at the *New York Times*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, etc.

I contacted the editor of *The Egg and Poultry Journal* and, very soon after, received the several issues that I requested. Along with them came a very kind letter. In part, it read, “Thank you for your interest. Would you, by chance, also be interested in working for our publication? We have an opening on our editorial staff. We are looking forward to hearing from you.”

I contacted the editor of *The Egg and Poultry Journal* and, very soon after, received the several issues that I requested. Along with them came a very kind letter. In part, it read, “Thank you for your interest. Would you, by chance, also be interested in working for our publication? We have an opening on our editorial staff. We are looking forward to hearing from you.”

The offer stunned—but mostly amused—me. I took the letter to class and presented it to my professor. He, too, was surprised but, being older and more mature than we were, he was pleased but not amused. As he read the letter aloud, my classmates tried hard to suppress their laughter—but their muffled giggles prevailed.

And that’s how I almost got involved in technical communication. After graduation and military service, I obtained my first full-time job—as a membership promotion writer with *The American Ceramic Society Journal*. (Ahem, a business/technical publication.)

Now fast forward, friends, and move with me from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s.

After gaining extensive experience on several newspapers and in industrial journalism (as creator and editor of a biweekly employee newspaper), I began looking for something different. My looking took place in the Detroit area, where I was living at that time. I came upon a small classified ad in a local newspaper that caught my attention. It was an ad that the General Motors Research Laboratories had placed for a science writer.

I studied the requirements and said to myself, “I can do this.” So I answered the ad and, just a bit later, I was offered the job. Well, I soon changed my tune from “I can do this,” to “Can I really do this?” It was truly hard work to convert from a general assignment news writer to a science writer. I quickly discovered a big difference: news writing usually focuses upon people whereas research reporting emphasizes process.

Of course, the vocabulary was different, too, and I had to learn the technical terminology of automotive research. My first assignment was to produce a four-page technical account of the research leading to a promising process called “Ferrotest.” This assignment required my interviewing the chief researcher (now known as a subject matter expert) and studying his technical project reports. Unfortunately, he had written very little on the subject. Fortunately, during our several conversations, he was friendly, patient, and a good “translator.” During our interviews, he explained the complexities of the process again ... again ... and again.

Even so, I wrote countless drafts before the article received okays from (1) my research engineer-friend, (2-3) his supervisor and department head, (4) my Technical Information Department head, and (5) Research Labs management. Understandably, the writing and approval process took several months; finally, “Ferrotest” was published for distribution to top-level GM executives, mid-level managers, and researchers in similar work throughout the corporation.

Looking back on my days as a college j-student and on my first days as a full-time technical communicator, I’ve acquired two insights that I would like to share:

› Be flexible. Be open-minded when that unexpected egg comes rolling your way.

› Be level-headed and unafraid in the face of formidable assignments. Maintain your balance and sense of self-worth. You will prevail—gradually, if not sooner.

Little by little, I found my niche as a science writer and instructor of science writing at the General Motors Research Laboratories. But that’s another story.
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