

sound.views

the newsletter of the Puget Sound Chapter of STC

www.stc-psc.org

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Transitioning to Technical Communication from Another Career

By Robert Reynolds

Unlike the generations of our parents and grandparents, a time when people worked the same jobs for decades, a career change is very common in today's work world.

This is made possible by trends such as rapid technology turnover (more things become obsolete more quickly), the increased availability of continuing education programs (including online programs), job burnout (corporate economics now demand more with less), budget cuts in the public sector (expensive road repairs take precedence over other programs), and more recently, today's economic climate (people have been forced to explore other avenues). Other motivators are job stress, a desire for more money or flexibility, and a need to work remotely. I have been through transitions myself, having been a software engineer, and before that, an environmental planner in the span of 15 years. My father, on the other hand, had the same job (and officemate) for 33 years.

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Volunteer with Puget Sound STC!

Over the years, a great number of Puget Sound STC members have volunteered to support our chapter, one of the largest chapters in the STC community. STC volunteers add value to the community and gain valuable professional experience along the way. Get the most value from your membership by offering to be a volunteer.

For more information, contact the Volunteer Coordinator at volunteer@stc-psc.org.

about sound.views

Sound Views is published for members of the Puget Sound Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

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Submissions

All members are welcome to submit articles, comments, and letters. Articles must address topics of interest to technical communicators, especially to those in the Puget Sound region of Washington.

Send articles in Word (doc), Rich-Text Format (RTF), or ASCII (txt) formats to the Managing Editor. Accompanying graphics or photos should be provided as separate files.

The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters and articles for length and clarity.

The submission deadline for the next issue of *Sound Views* is February 15, 2010.

Reprints

You may reprint original material appearing in *Sound Views* as long as you acknowledge the source and send a copy of the reprint to the Managing Editor.

For more information about the Puget Sound Chapter of STC, visit the Web site at www.stc-psc.org.

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From the President

By Mike Brazill, Chapter President

"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Year's Day."

Edith Lovejoy Pierce (Poet b.1904)

There is no doubt—2009 was a hard year. Many members of our community found themselves looking for work in a tough job market or accepting some hard lumps (pay cuts, forced leave, longer hours) to hang on to the jobs they have. It hasn't been easy for anyone.

But as I write this, most of the pages are blank for this year, and "we are going to put the words on them ourselves." It's nice to have a fresh start, and we are all hoping that better opportunities will come with the New Year.

Our STC chapter has big plans for 2010. As always, we'll start the year with our showcase of award winning entries, where competition winners present their work to our community. In the next few months, we'll follow up with a wide range of events that cover topics like job hunting tips, medical writing, form design, guidelines for getting published, and documentation usability.

We're also redesigning our Web site to create new ways for our community to collaborate and network. And we are continuing to award scholarship to two of the Puget Sound region's outstanding technical communication students.

I want to thank all of our community volunteers who contributed their time and effort last year. As many of them have learned, volunteering is a great way to improve personal networks, learn new skills, and have some fun.

And finally, I wish you all the best in 2010,

Mike

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Editor's Corner

By Mary Corder

The technical communication field received some positive press last month, when *U.S. News & World Report* named Technical Writer one of the 50 best careers of 2010.

According to *U.S. News*, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that future employment opportunities are brightest for technical writers with strong Web and multimedia skills, and job growth for technical writing positions is expected to be 18 percent, or 8,900 jobs, between 2008 and 2018. In the United States, the median pay for technical writers is \$61,620. The low end of the salary scale is less than \$36,500, and the highest-paid writers earn more than \$97,460.

For more information, see the Technical Writer profile on the *U.S. News & World Report* Web site (www.usnews.com/money/careers/articles/2009/12/28/technical-writer.html).

News like this is very encouraging, not only to those of us who already work in technical communication, but also those who are trying to break into in the field. This issue of *Sound Views* includes an interview with a technical communicator who transitioned into the role from another career. You can also read a review of Anne Gentle's 2009 book, *Conversation and Community: The Social Web for Documentation*.

We are always looking for volunteers to assist with writing for the newsletter, whether you'd like to help for the year or just for a single issue. I encourage you to contribute newsletter articles, suggestions, or ideas you have for improving *Sound Views*.

Feel free to send me your newsletter articles and feedback at newsletter@stc-psc.org.

Puget Sound STC is on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn

Puget Sound STC Facebook Group:

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=21641844730

Puget Sound STC Twitter:

twitter.com/STCPugetSound

Puget Sound STC LinkedIn Group:

www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2009451

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics at the U.S. Department of Labor neither tracks nor even estimates career change trends, probably because there is no clear-cut way to distinguish between promotions and career changes. However, it does report that people hold an average of about 14 jobs by the time they turn 40, including jobs as teenagers.

For this article, I interviewed Britton Steel, whose past life includes a stint as a mathematics teacher, and a law degree. I met him in 2007 when he was one of my instructors at Bellevue College. Britton is a freelance editor and consultant to nonprofit public health and social service organizations.

About the transition

What was your previous career/role? How long were you working in this previous field?

I was a math teacher for several years in a large urban school district in the Midwest, and then I went to law school, hoping to become a hotshot attorney. But when I got out, we were in one of the worst job markets for new attorneys in decades; and I'd realized by then that I couldn't stand all the conflict anyway. So I started looking at other options.

When you made your career change, what prompted you to choose technical communications?

In the summertime, I'd done some writing and curriculum development for the school district I was teaching in; those were my first writing assignments. In law school I was fortunate to be selected as an editor for one of the journals the law school published. That's when I realized I had found my calling.

Was the change a natural progression of your previous career, or a radical change?

On paper, it probably looks like a radical change, but it felt fairly natural to me. As I mentioned, I was originally a math teacher. I always told my students that the numbers, equations, and proofs

were irrelevant really; they were only useful as a means of conveying information to someone else. Math was a communication skill, just like English. Coming into this field with that mindset, I found technical communication to be a very natural extension of my writing skill set.

What facilitated your actual transition? Classes, reading, volunteer work, or a mentor?

I read a few books but otherwise learned by doing, so to speak, on my first contract assignments.

Did you undergo any formal training prior to landing your first gig/position? If so, where?

Nope, none.

Applying skills from previous career

Did your previous career/role involve any type of writing?

Nothing beyond what I described earlier.

Aside from writing, what tangible skill sets are you applying from your previous career, such as graphics, coding, or presentation?

Most of the work I've done involves user education (end-user documentation) or training materials for adult learners. Teaching experience has been invaluable. Talking to high school students has helped me learn to phrase concepts in the most concrete, concise way possible. It also trained me to chunk information into discrete segments of just the right length.

What intangible lessons, if any, have you applied to technical communications from your previous career?

Your persona (even if it's nothing more than a certain tone and style on the page) affects the user's experience with the content. Even if your corporate tone is fairly impersonal, you still have a sort of relationship with the reader that can keep the reader engaged and can help the reader a lot. So you always want to imagine yourself in a dialog with the user.

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Also, don't forget the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid) and the importance of planning and being very clear on the scope of each section of the document you're working on.

Do you find that people who started technical communications early have an edge in this industry?

No. I think those with consulting experience and subject matter expertise are the ones who adjust most easily.

Working with colleagues and audiences

Are the majority of your audiences in the high or low tech industry, or a mix of the two?

The last few years, I've been working with low-tech nonprofits, but the methodology is the same.

Based on your experience, which do you think is more common with most "transitioned" technical communicators: writers who decided to step into the technical industry, or techies/programmers who decided to become writers?

I think the mix is about even.

Given this article is posted online and available to multiple audiences, what advice would you give to someone who was considering a transition to technical communications?

In the current economic climate, almost any career change is a gamble. This career works well for those who have a bit more tolerance for fluctuations in the job market. I always tell my writing students that success depends as much on how well they get along with others in the workplace as it does on their writing, editing, and content knowledge. Try to learn something about graphic design as you go along. If you stick with it, your career may take you places that you wouldn't necessarily expect, but one day you'll wake up and realize you've carved out your own niche. Savor the feeling!

Robert E. Reynolds is in his second year as a technical writer after wearing hats as a software tester and landscape designer/environmental planner. He currently works at EDIFECS in Bellevue, and he can be reached at rer22@cornell.edu.

Round Table Topics

Are you a recent graduate? New to Puget Sound STC? Looking for advice or help with a project?

Check out our informal discussion and networking series, Round Table Topics, where technical communicators discuss innovative trends in the field, present their latest projects, and network with colleagues. The events are free, open to all, and held at a variety of Puget Sound-area locations.

Check our Web site (www.stc-psc.org) and e-mail announcements for times and locations.

Book Review: *Conversation and Community: The Social Web for Documentation*

By David Kowalsky

Anne Gentle's book *Conversation and Community: The Social Web for Documentation (C&C)*, published by XML Press, is notably absent from my compilation of suggested foundation books for technical communicators in my Sept/Oct 2009 Intercom article (www.stc.org/intercom/PDFs/2009/20090910_18-20.pdf). This was due to time constraints. After having finally read *C&C*, it is clear it belongs in the compilation. At least I can still give the book some recognition it deserves by writing this review.

Anne Gentle and XML Press may sound familiar. Ms. Gentle writes one of the better known tech writer blogs called "Just Write Click" (www.justwriteclick.com). The first book by XML Press, the publisher devoted to creating publications for technical communicators, was *Managing Writers* (reviewed by this author in May/June newsletter). *C&C* is their second and newest book.

The preface of *C&C* includes perhaps the best one-sentence summary of the book: "In this book you can learn about enabling conversation and community in your documentation using social media and social networking." The book does not actually jump right in to this; it begins first in Chapter 1 (Towards the Future of Documentation) more slowly by making the case for why this is necessary. It begins with a discussion about how search technology and its application by users have changed the face and entry point (the page your user lands on first) to technical documentation.

Chapter 2 (Concepts and Tools of the Social Web) includes a complete table of all the social media-related tools and terms (as of 2009; you can bet this list will change!) with definitions and descriptions that are organized by category. Then the rest of the

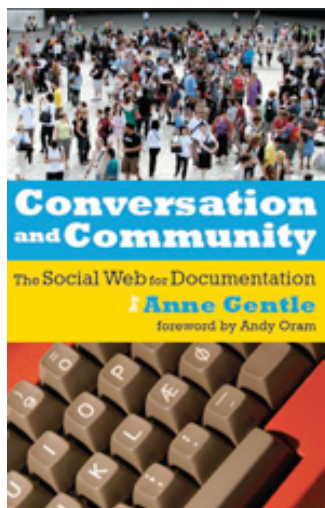
chapter goes into detail about each category. A few examples: Microblogging talks about Twitter. Community explains wikis. Syndicated covers blogs. Some of these you may already be very familiar with, and not need to read about so in depth.

Chapter 3 (Defining a Writer's Role with the Social Web) is arguably the most important chapter of the book. It discusses strategies for determining your role for participation in a community, and offers solutions for a phased approach to integrating the social Web in your writing. Ms. Gentle introduces two main roles, an enabler of conversation (sage on stage—deliverer of content) and instigator of conversation (stage

hand—a starting point for a conversation). Whichever role you undertake, the key point is to "repeatedly gather knowledge from communities and conversation, then bring it back and incorporate what you've learned into the documentation (74)."

Ms. Gentle explains four phases of participation in social media: (1) listening, (2) participation, (3) content sharing, and (4) platform sharing. In the explanations for each phase, there are many real-world suggestions. Tools for (1) listening include using subscription tools such as RSS feed readers, Google Alerts, and search.twitter.com. For (2) participation, examples include writing/commenting on blogs or finding/contributing to a wiki. Content sharing (3) entails, among other things, licensing your content to allow for sharing, or uploading photos or videos to a shared site (Flickr, YouTube, Vimeo).

Chapters 4 (Community and Documentation), 5 (Commenting and Connecting with Users), and 6



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(Wikis and Open Documentation Systems), really build on what was first introduced in chapter 3. Book Sprints, a form of collaborative authoring with the goal of publishing a book in a short time (3-4 months), is explained. There is helpful, practical advice on starting and maintaining a blog. I'm not so familiar with wikis, so that chapter was especially good at bringing me up-to-speed on the topic. And it was impressive to see there was even a section on "alternatives when a wiki is not the right match." An example: "If you are evaluating tools for online help, you may want to seek out online help tools that integrate comments, community, or conversation within the documentation (170)."

Chapter 7 (Finding Your Voice), the last chapter in the book, is about best practices for writing for the social web. There are style guide suggestions with good commentary on establishing your own style that has the right balance between a casual and formal tone. Also especially noteworthy is the

advice that "you should make your content share-able—blog-able, tweet-able, and tag-able—because you enable others to promote the content for you (191)."

C&C has all the typical "back of the book" features that don't need any explaining: a glossary, recommended reading, Web resources, and index. One perhaps surprising thing I found about the book is that considering it is all about conversations and community, the only mention of reader involvement was to invite readers to add new and relevant URLs to delicious.com.

If reading *C&C* sparks your interest in learning more about wikis like it did for me, be on the lookout for *WIKI: Grow Your Own For Fun and Profit*, by Alan J. Porter, due out in early 2010.

David Kowalsky is a technical writer for NEC Corporation of America and a senior member of STC's Puget Sound Chapter. He can be reached at david.kowalsky@necam.com.

Scholarship Program

The Puget Sound Chapter of the STC sponsors two scholarships to assist students who are pursuing established degree programs in technical communication.

Eligibility

Students who are enrolled in the following approved two-year, four-year, and graduate programs in colleges and universities in the Puget Sound area are eligible to apply for the scholarships:

- Edmonds Community College: A.T.A., Visual Communications
- Art Institute of Seattle: B.F.A., Graphic Design
- Shoreline Community College: A.A.A.S., Graphic Design
- UW College of Engineering: B.S., M.S.T.C., PhD. in Technical Communication; Certificates in User-Centered Design, Tech Writing & Editing
- UW College of Education: M.Ed., Educational Communication & Technology
- UW School of Art: B.A., Visual Communication Design
- Western Washington University: B.S., Industrial Design

Awards

Awards will be granted toward school tuition and expenses. Two awards are granted each year.

Schedule

The application period will be announced at www.stc-psc.org in January 2010.