Region 6 News from the Winter STC Board Meeting

By Susan Jensen, Region 6 Director-Sponsor

Greetings, R6’ers!

I am very pleased to be able to announce two special actions made at the winter board meeting.

John James Conklin (fondly known by most of us as "Jamie") was elected to the Associate Fellows rolls. You probably know Jamie from his role as your Director-Sponsor in the term preceding mine. Jamie's efforts for STC and the technical communication also extend beyond his regional activities. I particularly liked the following quote from his nomination recommendation: "Jamie knows where he's going and his plans for getting there benefit the technical communication profession." Please join me in congratulating Jamie in this significant recognition. You can reach Jamie at james_conklin@idt.mb.ca.

The newest STC chapter is in Region 6! The board formally recognized the formation of the Saskatchewan chapter. Centered in Regina, Saskatchewan, the new chapter is led by president Andrew (Andy) Ratushniak. Many of the members of this new chapter were previously members of the Manitoba chapter, which provided moral and financial support in getting the new chapter started. Please welcome the new chapter, and send your ideas of support and congratulations to Andy at aratushniak@sk.sympatico.ca.

Critiquing Organizational Culture: A Workshop for Professional Writers

by Carla Carpenter, Adrienne Lambert, and Neil Lindeman

Introduction and Workshop Overview

Most professional communication theory and research about corporate culture, communicative practices, and the professional status of professional writers is, of course, relevant not just to teachers and students of professional writing, but, perhaps most important, to working professional writers. However, although much of the literature calls for classroom pedagogies of cultural critique, relatively little calls for its application in the workplace, where critique of corporate culture would have the greatest impact. We consequently have developed a one-day workshop for working professional writers to address this shortcoming. Our workshop focuses on giving writers an increased awareness of the cultural factors reflected in and perpetuated by their organizations’ writing processes and conventions.

We would run the workshop as consultants hired to be part of an off-site, professional development conference. As opposed to an on-site workshop where we would be invited to a particular company in order to train writers for a half-day or so, we believe that an off-site setting would allow us to speak with slightly more candor.
about the issue of corporate culture. Also, we envision inviting writers from various companies (our workshop would be advertised to several companies who would send their writers to the conference) to join together in a session, creating an interesting mix of corporate cultures. Through comparing the communicative norms and cultures of their various companies, writers in our workshop would see that their culture isn’t “natural,” and therefore is susceptible to change.

We plan to be particularly careful, however, with the amount of candor we bring to our workshop. We understand that professional audiences with loyalties to particular organizations are strikingly different from academic audiences. And no company wants to pay for their employees to attend a workshop whose goal is to show writers how oppressive their employer is. Considering our audience, then, we intend to be careful with our terms. We will treat critique of corporate culture as a process of revision rather than dissent or resistance (Herndl 349). We hope to emphasize that cultural awareness increases an individual writer’s opportunities to make a difference within his or her organization, thus increasing job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction, in fact, will be an important point of departure for our workshop on critique, because professional writers generally seem to suffer from a lack of job satisfaction. We will refer to low job satisfaction in only the most general and round-about way, however, perhaps by emphasizing that all professionals, not just writers, can increase job satisfaction by increasing their control of what happens at work. Our goal is not to exacerbate the morale problems of professional writers by making it more clear how, specifically, a particular corporate culture locates them within a hierarchy and values their work. While research on this topic informs and motivates our project, we hope to encourage optimism as much as possible by focusing on potential for change.

Our workshop is also designed to focus in part on the experience of being a “newcomer” to an organization. In advertising our workshop, we would stress that it is designed particularly to help those new to a corporation understand and function effectively within its culture. We will welcome tenured employees, too, because their familiarity with the subtleties of their culture would certainly be valuable, especially as a point of contrast with the perspective of newcomers. However, at certain points in our discussion, we will ask even the tenured employees to think back to their experience as newcomers. Our reason for focusing on the “newcomer” experience is that newcomers are well-positioned to notice the peculiarities of their organization’s culture. The “newcomer” experience, we anticipate, might be one of the best sites for revealing a corporate culture that becomes less visible as one becomes more assimilated into it.

Workshop Description

After an introduction and overview of the workshop, the assembled audience of professional writers would be divided into smaller focus groups by the consulting team. These small group sessions would be led by one or two members of the consulting team, and would encourage interaction not only between the facilitator and the participants, but between participants as well. This interaction would be fostered by different presentation methods, depending on the learning styles of the participants and the teaching/leading styles of the consultants. For example, engaging workshop participants into the small group activities may require demonstrations of application, or perhaps an analysis of covered topics. Some consultants may use inductive exercises, some may use deductive methods, or a combination of both. There will be visual displays or hands-on activities. The small group sessions may incorporate facilitator lectures or student presentations. The point is that the facilitator would initially “feel out” the group participants and react with an appropriate teaching method for the group and for the activity being presented.

Prior to the workshop, along with their workshop registration materials, the participants would have received a brief description of the small group sessions. These descriptions are provided in the following section, in italics. This section then focuses on the content of each of the actual small group sessions being presented in the workshop, and assumes that the consultant will choose a suitable process for providing that content.

For each of the three small group sessions discussed below, there will be the participant’s pre-workshop description of topics, followed by an explanation of why that topic is of importance to newcomers and tenured writers (Purpose), a discussion of how the presented material can be applied to the participant’s workplace(s) (Application to Participant’s Workplace), and one example exercise that could be used in the small group session (Exercise).

Topic 1: Corporate Document Review

In this session, you will discuss your company’s document production process, focusing on one of the following types of documents: newsletter, memo, brochure, business letter, or a technical document such as a set of instructions or a manual. You will discuss with your peers and the group facilitator the process your company follows in the different stages of document production. You will share data as well as gather information on the following: the idea process, the delegation process, the editing process, and the legal process of document production. You will have an opportunity to explore your personal impact on the documents you prepare for your company, as well as the impact the documents in your company and the policies and procedures that are in place in your workplace.
have on your professional writing processes. To conclude, we will focus on how to analyze/critique documents that are designed in your workplace and workplaces similar to yours.

Purpose:

To evaluate how documents produced in an organizational setting reproduce the organization’s dominant discourse and to give participants tools to critique their workplace writing.

Application to Participant’s Workplace:

Ability of participant to review and analyze current workplace documents. Ability of participant to place documents and document producers within the organizational culture in which they are currently immersed. Ability to recognize that different organizations have different corporate cultures. Ability of company newcomers to recognize and understand both the document production process and the workplace hierarchy.

Exercise:

Each participant will be asked to bring a document they have produced in their workplace. The consulting team member(s) will ask the participants to describe with the group the entire process of the production of the document, including the idea conception, the drafting and revision processes, the purpose of the document, the layers of audience of the document, who assisted in the document’s production, the graphic design of the document, the legal implications of the document and so on. The facilitator will ask leading questions if participants are having difficulty with the discussion of these documents, or if the group is really stuck, the facilitator will use examples from other workplaces and guide them through the discussion of the sample document before moving on to the documents the participants have provided.

After everyone has shared their ideas and information about document production, the facilitator will lead a discussion of the levels of authority associated with the production process. Each participant, especially if they are from different companies, will have a different answer to these questions: the participants will be asked how much control they had over the content of the text in the document. Was it dictated to them, or were they given free reign to ‘create’ the information contained in the document? How much collaboration was involved in the production of the document? What departments were involved? Who, if anyone, had to approve the document contents and layout before it was put into use? These types of questions will lead to an enhanced awareness of organizational hierarchies in the workplace. As noted earlier, because the relatively low status of professional writers encourages a benign attitude towards their work, identification of how a document proceeds through an organization’s hierarchy can enhance issues of audiences and purpose for a professional writer in a given writing assignment and facilitate a more positive attitude toward their work. Note: This exercise will be particularly helpful to newcomers to a given organization, as the document production process for their company, as well as the organizational hierarchy will be revealed and discussed in detail.

Topic 2:

Implementing Change/Incorporating New Ideas In Your Workplace In this session, you will be able to explore specific ways to implement new ideas about professional writing into your workplace. Some workplaces have very strict rules and policies in place to govern your writing and other forms of communication. What should you do if you don’t always agree with these policies? How do you feel about current policies at your company? Some workplaces have loose or informal/unwritten rules regarding these topics. We will discuss with you possible solutions for these and other problems that relate to changing workplace communication policies and incorporating new ideas about how to write and communicate at your company. We will introduce a concept called organizational hierarchy and talk about the ways in which it affects you as you communicate at your job.

Purpose:

To help the participants recognize that they can implement workplace change in subtle ways without jeopardizing their job security.

Application to Participants’ Workplace:

Ability of the participant to change corporate culture through a process of revision and negotiation rather than dissent or resistance.

Ability of the participant (especially the newcomer) to realize how corporate culture Ability of the participant to understand that disagreement with the content of assigned writing projects can often be reconciled.

Exercise:

The exercise for this session is a writing exercise. Each participant will be asked to write three brief memos as if they were requested by the director/manager/supervisor they currently work with or for. All three memos will be on the same topic. The facilitator(s) for this group will explain that the director/manager/supervisor has asked the participant to write a memo on a topic (chosen by the facilitator depending on the mix of the participants). As an example, the memo topic could be “How our company will implement the ‘everyone will wear one purple sock and one white sock from now on’ policy.” The topic that is chosen will reflect a situation that most, if not all, of the participants do not agree with.

The first memo the participants will be asked to write will be a serious attempt to write the memo to an audience of the participant’s workforce. The participants will be asked to use a format that they are comfortable with and that adheres to their company’s policies. Even if the participants do not agree with the policy they are being asked to put into writing and distribute, they must write the memo.
After completion of this writing exercise, as a group, the participants will share their brief memos with the other memo is to be on the exact same topic as the first, with the exception that the participants may use whatever language they desire, they may insert their objections to the policy, they may use whatever tone and style they choose, and they are encouraged to be as ridiculously inappropriate as possible. They may attack the policy, the policy maker, and the company if they so choose. After completion of this memo, the class will again share their results. A short discussion lead by the facilitator will point out that professional writers do not always agree with the content of what they are asked to write. The group will discuss which memo was easier to write, and why. They will discuss how they felt when writing the first memo and the second memo. Did writing the second memo feel good, or was it uncomfortable?

Finally, the group will be asked to write a third memo, one which is appropriate in style and convention, and contains the necessary content, but just pushes the boundaries a little. Word choice and tone can be suitable, but slightly less apropos than the first memo. After writing this memo, the class will share their work and discuss how small changes in tone, word choice, and attitude while producing the document affect the final product.

Topic 3:
Job Satisfaction and Growing with Your Career How do you, as a professional writer, remain satisfied with your job? How do you challenge yourself in your daily writing and communication duties? What opportunities does your company make for you to improve your skills? What opportunities do you create for yourself? In this session, you will be interacting with each other and with the group facilitator as you focus on ways to continue to grow as a professional writer and communicator. You will be given the seeds for specific ideas that can greatly enhance your job satisfaction. These concepts incorporate suggestions on how to shape how others in your company view what you do on a daily basis. You will also be given the tools to implement a few simple changes or enhancements to your current daily routine that can greatly improve your overall career satisfaction.

Purpose:
To assist the participants in understanding that their writing processes perpetuate and are informed by organizational culture and to help them negotiate their writing processes with their job status and organizational culture in order to increase their job satisfaction.

Application to Participant’s Workplace:
Ability of the participant to increase job satisfaction through an awareness of the impact their writing has on others in their organizations and the audiences of the documents.

Ability of participants to use their empowerment in the workplace through the use of agency in their workplace writing.

Exercise:
The exercise for this session is a role-play. The small group facilitator will choose pairs of participants, and give them ten minutes to discuss the following: Who is your direct supervisor? Who do you supervise? What types of documents do you prepare in the workplace? How are these documents used? How long does it take you to produce these documents? Without disclosing salary, are you satisfied with your compensation? Do you like what you do at the workplace? What would you do differently at your workplace? What works well at your workplace? After the ten minutes, the participant groups would be required to enact an impromptu role-play for the rest of the small group. The facilitator would assign one participant to be the professional writer, the other participant would play the role of the supervisor, co-worker, printer, etc. One of the following scenarios would be assigned to the pair, and they would have to role play for three minutes:

- Supervisor flatly rejects a proposal that took professional writer six days to produce.
- Printer is unable to reproduce document (written by professional writer) by deadline assigned by professional writer’s superior. MIS Department employee is unable to retrieve lost document due to system error.
- Professional writer has lost two weeks worth of project data.
- Professional writer has to inform supervisor that 45,000 customer letters were mailed with information that could have legal ramifications, due to the fact that professional writer did not follow procedure regarding risk management.
- Supervisor asks professional writer to produce a document that the professional writer has an ethical issue with.

After the role-play, the entire small group, as well as the role-players would provide feedback on positive ways the professional writer handled the difficult situations, and also feedback on different strategies to try for further enhancement of workplace communication between professional writers and co-workers from other departments and other strata of the organizational hierarchy.

It is the goal of this exercise to have the professional writer, being in the confines of the workshop atmosphere, have “safe” place to “practice” questioning skills, communication tactics, problem solving skills, and assertion of opinion.

Works Cited
Cyber-Access: Creating Web Sites for Diverse Audiences

By Donna Kain

Problems in providing access to all kinds of information stem from difficulties in matching provider and user technologies; differences in ranges of experience, needs, and abilities among users; and lack of awareness about how to create information for diverse audiences that include people with physical and cognitive disabilities. In particular, the growth of electronic communication, as well as that of the technologies its use has spawned, provides many opportunities and challenges for the people who work with it. However, barriers to the technology and/or the messages do exist for many people. In thinking about audiences for electronic communication, we should consider potential users’ differences in vision, hearing, dexterity, cognitive and other learning/perception issues (such as dyslexia), economic and educational limitations, and the physical environments in which people use our work (Ray and Ray, 1998; TRACE, 1995; Starling, 1998; CAST 1998; WAI Accessibility Guidelines).

Websites pose some of the biggest challenges for professional communicators because of the diversity of their audiences. To design web sites that are accessible to the largest potential number of users, we need to understand accessibility concepts in a number of areas including hardware, software, and design principals. Our responsibility is to inform ourselves as advocates of all potential users of electronic communication.

Technology. Technology poses several challenges. The rapid advances in applications for communication have lead people to create Web and other hyper-text based applications by employing the latest technologies available to them without considering fully the implications for their audiences. Such technologies include programming languages and computer applications that some portion of the audience may not be able to use because of differences in hardware and software. Some users’ hardware or software may not retrieve or display information in the form for which it was created; or the design of information is not compatible with enhanced technology available to people with specific disabilities (Assis-Tech, 1998 for product information). Some audiences may use hardware and software that provide alternative methods of navigating or receiving information, such as screen readers for the blind.

Experience. Our users will have all types of abilities and education; they will have differing access to equipment and software; they will be of all ages; they will come from various cultures and countries. Unless we are designing and writing for very specific audiences with whom we are familiar, professional communicators should work toward their largest potential audience.

Design and writing. The areas of design and content provide the most opportunity for professional communicators to facilitate others. If we don’t know who our audience is, we can’t know what kind of hardware and software they are using. The goal, then, is to implement design considerations that will be accessible by the most types of hardware, software, and users. Two particular problem areas are design of interface and/or instructions: instructions are not clear or intuitive; instructions rely on graphics that are not available to all audiences; alternatives (such as “no frames,” text only) are not provided. Design and delivery of information: information is obscured by backgrounds, colors, or graphics; font choices or sizes are difficult for some people to read.

Principles for Accessible Design

A working group of architects, product designers, and environmental design researchers has identified seven design principles for use in evaluating existing designs, guiding the design process, and educating both designers and consumers about the characteristics of more usable products and environments. The authors are involved in a collaborative effort to establish and validate “universal design” principles to guide a wide range of design disciplines including environments, products, and communications. Though not all the principles are applicable in all instances, they include:

Equitable Use. The design is useful and marketable to most users.

Flexibility in Use. The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

Simple and Intuitive Use. Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

Perceptible Information. The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities.

Tolerance for Error. The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.

Low Physical Effort. The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.

Size and Space for Approach and Use. Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user’s body size, posture, or mobility.

Issues such as cost, aesthetics, and cultural appropriateness certainly must be considered as well. But the criteria above don’t inhibit good design, they enhance usability.

Key concepts for Accessible Web site development

It is essential that professional communicators and
professional communication educators develop and teach an awareness of universal design concepts as they relate to information development and management. We need to understand the opportunities and limitations of the virtual environment and all its potential users. Know something about the assistive hardware and software available and be aware of how the design of a Web site could impact the technology your audience may be using. Concentrate on good design principles and integration rather than on what “cool” things you can do with programming languages, unless those functions help the majority of your audience receive the information and services you are offering. Use various methods for providing information on your site so that you accommodate the greatest number of visitors.

As much as tools like special hardware and software can help on the users’ side, they will not be able to make up for inaccessible site design on the providers’ side. Professional communicators can do a number of very simple things that don’t require a lot of training time or technical knowledge to help audiences better access their electronic communications, particularly web pages. Here are a few suggestions:

Provide alternative representations of information. Give people choices of page displays, such as with or without frames; graphic and text or text only; with or without audio; or large-font text displays. This doesn’t mean just taking the page and stripping out the “cool stuff.” This is about considering each rendition on its own merits. (CAST)

Provide “D links.” This is a new convention being implemented by people concerned with accessibility of visual material. Place a small “D” by graphics and link it to a text description of page layouts and/or individual graphics.

Use alternative tagging (“ALT” tags). When a user places the mouse on a graphic, the alternative tag enables a pop-up box with a simple text explanation of a function, link, or graphic.

Add transcripts and captioning to audio. If people can’t hear your audio, they won’t get your message.

These suggestions won’t solve all the accessibility problems we now have with Web based information. However, we need to continue studying how advances in technology and in information delivery will impact all users. As we develop sites, we need to involve audiences made up of all kinds of people to test our sites. To do this, we can establish a testing program for our sites that includes diverse users test other sites on the Web use “Bobby,” (CAST) or the World Wide Web Consortium’s free HTML Validator Service to test our sites periodically.

As professional communicators, we should adopt a stance that promotes accessibility to the information and services we offer on the web and for other hyper-text based applications. We have an opportunity to show our support for accessibility concepts in an arena where, so far, all compliance is voluntary.

Resources for Accessible Web Page Design

ADA Technical Assistance Program.
http://www.adata.org/dbtac.htm
Provides information, training, and technical assistance to businesses and agencies with duties and responsibilities under the ADA and to people with disabilities with rights under the ADA.

Adaptive Technology Resource Centre,
University of Toronto Information Commons http://www.utoronto.ca/atrc/

Assis-TECH, Inc
Provides hardware, software and other products for a variety of needs

Bobby 3.0
http://www.cast.org/bobby/
Web-based public service offered by CAST that analyzes web pages for accessibility to people with disabilities and compatibility with various browsers.

CAST
http://www.cast.org
A site where people can learn about and experience universal design.

Starling Access Services
http://www.igs.net/~starling/starling.htm

Trace Center
http://trace.wisc.edu
Part of a The Universal Design Research Project, funded by the U.S. Dept. of Education National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.


WAI Accessibility Guidelines: Authoring Tools
W3C Working Draft
http://www.w3.org/WAI/AU/WAI-AUTOOLS-19981102

“Cyber-Access,” continued