

WriteUp

An Online Instructor Shares Her Experience

By Debra Mixon, Suncoast Chapter

Recent conversations and reading materials may have convinced you that being a technical communicator means being a life-long student. This is not necessarily a bad thing. For many technical communicators, the classroom experience means excitement and challenge. The nervousness of the first day in class, the prospect of learning about a new area, buying books—it’s all thrilling.

But no matter how much we love to learn, continuing education is difficult. Our schedules already require constant manipulation, so how do we find the time and convenience we need? Distance education is one answer. And distance learning over the Internet is bringing even more opportunity for would-be students with classes in areas relevant to technical communication.

Finding the idea of online courses intriguing, I began exploring. After reviewing several Web sites offering technical communication courses, I chose a course offered by UCLA Extension through its online program, OnlineLearning.net. (For more information about the program, go to www.OnlineLearning.net.) I was looking for an information design course and this program regularly offers one, so I signed up. The nine weeks of the course were a valuable (albeit too short!) experience.

The instructor for the course, Sara Stohl, has taught both “on-the-ground” in traditional classrooms and online. In addition to teaching, Sara has been a technical communicator for nearly 20 years and is currently owner and principal of Stohl & Associates.

Wanting to explore an instructor’s point of view of online courses, I asked Sara a few questions about teaching online. Following are her answers, which offer valuable insight into this growing area of educational opportunity for technical communicators.

Q: Sara, how long have you taught at Online Learning.net?

A: There are really two answers to that question, since OnlineLearning.net contracts with UCLA Extension to provide Embanet, the distance learning software. I have taught several technical communication courses at

UCLA Extension for more than 5 years. About 3 years ago, the University decided that the entire technical communications program would be delivered through distance learning, so all the tech com faculty had to quickly learn new software, new instructional design, and how to create and sustain a virtual classroom environment. On-the-ground teaching was no longer an option and, in fact, a few instructors quit because they did not want to adapt.

Q: What attracted you to teaching online?

A: Its possibilities appealed to me, although at first I was resistant because of the amount of work changing from an on-the-ground classroom to a virtual classroom entailed. Distance learning still has some disadvantages: it’s more difficult to interact with students and to get them to interact together, for example. But its advantages are great: More students are matriculating through UCLA’s tech com program than ever before because we can teach anyone, anywhere, any time. Asynchronous learning means both instructors and students can manage their time to their advantage. Students can look up recommended web sites as you are talking about them in live chats, and respond immediately. The live chats can get very lively, and can be quite entertaining, too. And my favorite: I can do it in my jammies.

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Write Up

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Write Up communicates chapter and Society news six times per year for the benefit of members and friends of the Suncoast Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Submissions

Meeting writeups, feature articles, and software/book reviews are encouraged (100-700 words). Preferred formats include MS Word e-mail attachment or text in the body of your e-mail message.

Reprints

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From the Editor

The Hottest Suncoast Chapter News



Write Up gets a new editor

Please welcome Diana Moran as she accepts her new role as Write Up editor. Diana moved back to the Tampa area from Melbourne where she was involved in STC. If you have any suggestions for the newsletter, please contact Diana at morandiana@aol.com.

I've enjoyed being the editor of the Write Up and I'm looking forward to my less intensive role as one of the staff photographers. To the members who cheered me on during this exhausting year—Eileen McPartland, Lore Eargle, Debra Mixon, Michelle Ratcliffe, Mark Hanigan, Melissa Lamb, and Bill Graham—thank you for your support and your compliments. It made all the difference.

Write Up wins a Merit award

The Suncoast chapter newsletter won a Merit award in the 1999 STC Newsletter Competition. For the complete list of competition winners, visit the STC web site at www.stc-va.org/fcomp.htm and click on **Chapter & SIG Competitions**.

Write Up goes online

We're no longer going to print the Write Up. Starting with the July/August 2000 issue, the newsletter will be online only. The newsletters will be in PDF format on the Suncoast chapter web site. Members will receive an email announcing each new issue.

Suncoast member gets creative

The *Intercom* ran a contest for members to make up creative STC terms called STClets (*stick ' lets*). Denise Passmore, our database manager, was among the winners. Her word was **Docuphobia** (*doc' u pho bi a*) n. Fear of using documentation resulting from some previous traumatic event such as programming a VCR.

Region 3 has a new Director-Sponsor

Our new Director-Sponsor is Rob Houser, a senior member of the Atlanta chapter. Our outgoing Director-Sponsor, Michelle Ratcliffe, is moving on to other STC duties. Thank you, Melissa, for all your hard work!

The chapter has a new mentor manager

Pam Treme is taking over the mentor program from Eileen McPartland, who founded the program in the beginning of 1999. The mentor program pairs USF technical writing students with Suncoast chapter members. This provides students with an inside look into their chosen field.

This position involves coordinating the mentor program, pairing students with mentors, and providing support to all members involved. Pam has served as president of USF's Student Society for Technical Communication chapter and is currently the student liaison.



Help Design Checklist

By Jim Sands, Chicago Chapter

Someone recently asked me whether I knew of any special design considerations for Help systems. Our brief conversation resulted in the following list. Design factors specific to HTML Help are listed at the end.

- First and foremost—keep it simple. Provide 3 click, 30 second access to all Help information.
- Familiarize yourself with your users and their everyday workflow, especially the resources and procedures they utilize to troubleshoot problems, and answer everyday questions.
- Stick with common fonts, and limit the number of fonts that you use.
- Alphabetize lists and number sequences.
- Provide a well-tested Table of Contents and Index.
- Keep your information chunking consistent.
- Don't address multiple procedures in a single Help topic.
- Keep colors simple. Limit your colors to 256 to accommodate older display screens and color challenged users.
- Provide backward- and forward-navigation for all Help topics.

For HTML Help systems:

- Know what browser (and version) your customers will be using.
- Determine if all of your customers will have internet access.
- Use cascading style sheets if possible.

Finally, once you have identified your design, build a small prototype and test it on potential users. It may look good to you, but take the time to ensure that it works for your customers. Listen to their feedback, because your customers are the most valuable members of your design team.

Have a question about Help?

Jim Sands is an independent on-line Help consultant and welcomes your questions and comments. Send questions to ohlp@msn.com, 847-918-8761, or to Sands & Associates, 650 Whitney Court, Suite 404, Gurnee, IL 60031. All questions will be answered in *Help 101* rather than individually.

Help 101 offers practical tips and educational resources for online Help developers. This column is a regular feature of both WriteUp and Byline, the newsletter of the Chicago chapter.

Society Election Results for 2000-2001

From Maurice Martin, STC Communication Director

The Society for Technical Communication is pleased to announce the results of its election for 2000-2001.

President

Mark Hanigan, a senior member with the Suncoast chapter, assumes the office of president after a year of service as first vice president.

First Vice President

Judith L. Glick-Smith, a senior member with the Lone Star chapter, assumes the office of first vice president after a year of service as second vice president.

Second Vice President

Edward J. See, a senior member with the New York Metro chapter, has been elected second vice president.

Secretary

Jean C. Gabriel, a senior member with the Orange County chapter, has been re-elected to the office of secretary.

Director-Sponsor, Region 2

Christopher J. Benz, a senior member with the North Carolina chapter, has been elected director-sponsor of Region 2.

Director-Sponsor, Region 3

Rob Houser, a senior member with the Atlanta chapter, has been elected director-sponsor of Region 3.

Nominating Committee

Clark E. Beck, a fellow with the Southwestern Ohio chapter, has been elected to serve a two-year term on the nominating committee.

Nominating Committee

M. Gwaltney Mountford, a senior member with the East Bay chapter, has been elected to serve a two-year term on the nominating committee.

Membership Update

By Melissa Lamb
Suncoast Chapter
Membership Manager

New Members

Susan I. Gill
Rosemary Mieire
Constance J. Whitesell
Tiffany L. Graves
Mary H. Jackman
Carol L. Mitchell
Marilyn Wolf
Robin L. Zancara

Transferring Members

Abigail J. Arthur-Chillman
Jennifer Geaslen Henzmann

Membership at a Glance

As of February 29, 2000:

Total members:	24,767
Members in the U.S.:	21,718
Members in Canada:	2,051
Members elsewhere:	998
Total chapters*:	146

*Includes 30 student chapters



President's Message

By Eileen McPartland, Suncoast Chapter President

Welcome to the new STC year. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who volunteered their time this past year. Thank you all for such a great year. Our chapter would not be what it is today without all of you.

I'd also like to welcome all the new officers and volunteers. Thank you for taking the challenge and participating in this organization. We are planning to make a few changes to our chapter this year.

First, we are going to move this newsletter online...we're keeping up with technology! This is the last paper issue. Also, we are going to change the "President's Message" column to "Leadership Message." This way, you can hear from a variety of STC leaders.

Another change we plan to make is the format of our administrative council meetings. Instead of meeting at a site each month, we

are going to try a variety of things such as conference calls and virtual web chats. For those of you are unaware, the administrative council meetings are open to anyone. The meetings are on the Tuesday following our regular Thursday meeting. Listen for the format at each of the monthly meetings.

These are just a few of the changes we're making to keep up with technology and improve the chapter. We'd love to hear your suggestions for the upcoming year so please come to the chapter planning meeting in June. This is a great time to share your ideas and contribute to maintaining the high standards of this chapter.

I'm looking forward to another successful year.

Eileen McPartland

Featured Web Site

Internet Resources for Technical Communication

<http://members.home.com/ksoltys/techcomm.html>

This is a site created and maintained by Keith Soltys. It contains links to a broad range of topics related to technical writing including:

- HTML, SGML, and XML
- Colleges and Universities
- Copyright information
- Mailing lists and newsgroups
- Online help documentation
- WWW publishing

The Core Dump page offers Keith's personal book and software reviews and his opinions on different applications.

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- ForeHelp HTML
- Online Graphics and Paint Shop Pro
- WinHelp Design
- Windows CE Help
- Code-Level WinHelp, HTML Help, JavaHelp

CONSULTING & DEVELOPMENT

- Online information system design – format selection, file structure, interface design, documentation specs
- Evaluation and debugging
- Hard-copy or WinHelp conversion to HTML-based formats
- Prototyping and development

**FOREFRONT
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Q: How well do you feel your students learn online?

A: I also teach these courses on-the-ground for another local university, so I can easily compare students' progress. While so much depends on the individual student's work and attitude, all other factors being equal, the students learn as well through distance learning as they do in a real classroom. In fact, some of the best, most polished, most creative class projects have been submitted by my online students. I'm not sure why, but I'd like to think it's because they are more familiar with computers and computer tools, and thus more fearless around them.

Q: Can you describe an important advantage and disadvantage for students taking an online class?

A: I described many of the advantages in my answer to your second question. Another advantage for local students is they don't have to pay outrageous parking fees (which is a concern in southern California). One disadvantage—to me and my students—is that since I can't see my students' progress, I sometimes don't catch them before they falter or fail.

A few (and I want to stress a very few) students have submitted final projects that showed little or no understanding of the principles I was attempting to teach. By the time their projects reached me, it was too late. However, I have noticed that these students are the ones who do not participate in our weekly live chats and who seldom interact with the other students. In a virtual classroom, it's extremely important for everyone to be as outgoing as possible and to constantly share ideas, questions, thoughts, and comments with the instructor and the other students—just like in a regular classroom.

Q: Are there any myths about online learning that you would like to correct?

A: There are a couple of myths that have persisted. One is that distance learning is not as effective as on-the-ground learning. I have not found it so. But (and it's a big but) unless both the instructor and the student are willing to find acceptable virtual substitutes for classroom dynamics, that myth will come true. It is a different way of teaching and a different way of learning, and some people cannot adjust to it.

The other myth is that academic institutions are the last bastions of "pure" learning and distance learning takes academics too near crass commercialism; that is, operating a university like a business, of all things. In fact, universities and colleges have for the past two decades had to struggle with the fact that they must generate revenue, and they are constantly finding new ways to do that.

May Chapter Meeting Recap

By Mary Lauby

For the May meeting, we honored chapter members who volunteered throughout 1999. The chapter officers and other volunteers received certificates of appreciation and gifts from the chapter.

Debra Mixon won the Suncoast Standout Award. The chapter presents this award to one member each year who has dedicated an extraordinary amount of time and effort to the chapter. In addition to serving as Area Program Coordinator, Debra continually went out of her way to provide provisions for each meeting and stayed late after every meeting to clean up—not easy tasks.

Bob Bennett won the Distinguished Chapter Service Award. Bob served for many years (too many to count!) as our chapter treasurer, historian, and newsletter photographer. Congratulations, Bob and thanks for everything you've done for the chapter.

In addition to recognizing the award winners, the



Mark Hanigan poses with Bob Bennett as chapter members look on.

meeting also featured a presentation by a manager of a Relax the Back store. He explained the effects of poor posture, talked about work hazards for your spine, and handed out prizes. Some of the items given out included wrist rests, inflatable lumbar supports, a foot rest, and a book. Everyone in attendance received a coupon for Relax the Back products.

Mark Hanigan Presents "The Leader's Armada"

By Mary Lauby

Our April chapter meeting was hosted by Mark Hanigan. Mark began his presentation asking us to write down our definition of leadership as he explained how if you asked 100 people you would get 100 different answers. Mark told us that an important aspect of leadership is knowing yourself before you attempt to lead others.

Mark also pointed out that leadership is not a single skill. He thinks of leadership as an armada made up of many skills, or ships. Mark's Leadership Armada includes:



Mark Hanigan demonstrating his fine leadership abilities.

Statesmanship is the art of governing others. This requires good listening skills.

Workmanship is skill of a craftsman or an artisan. Strive to lead by example by always doing your best. Leaders set the standards.

Sportsmanship is a must for leaders. Leaders show others how to play fair, win with dignity, and lose gracefully.

Penmanship is a metaphor for writing and speaking clearly. Give clear directions to those in your charge. Make sure that you are understood.

Stewardship is defined as managing another's property, finances, or other affairs.

Scholarship is the knowledge resulting from study and research in a particular field.

Ownership is about empowering those you lead. Let them take ownership of their piece.

Brinkmanship is the practice of seeking advantage by creating the impression that you are willing and able to push a situation to the limit rather than concede. In the long run, being true to your values pays off, even when there is a short-term tangible cost.

Fellowship is defined as condition of sharing similar

interests, ideals, or experiences, as by reason of profession, religion, or nationality. Understanding, respecting, and being interested in the interests of your team is critical.

Showmanship is defined as providing theatrical production with a flair for dramatic or visual effectiveness. You have to capture people's attentions to open their minds to your message.

Friendship is the sharing of similar interests, ideals, or experiences. Mark reminds us that to have friends, you must be a friend! Most people spend more waking hours at their place of employment than anywhere

else. It is much nicer to work in a friendly environment.

Ship-shape is what a leader must be. This means maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Ship of Fools is Mark's metaphor for avoiding foolish or unplanned ventures. But, Mark warns, don't let fear of making mistakes paralyze you

Dream Ship is Mark's metaphor for a leader's vision. A leader must set and continually re-evaluate long-term goals.

It doesn't fit into the ship/armada theme, but I think there are other skills that leaders should possess, such as flexibility and the ability to improvise. This occurred to me when I realized that instead of a screen for his presentation, Mark was using a white tablecloth. This didn't faze Mark at all and he gave yet another entertaining and educational presentation.

At the STC Annual Conference 2000 in Orlando, Mark began his biggest leadership challenge yet as Society president. I can't wait to see where he leads us.

Translations

From Tech Talk, the Twin Cities chapter's newsletter (April 2000)

In a Tokyo hotel:

"Is forbidden to steal hotel towels please. If you are not a person to do such thing is please not to read notis."

In a Bucharest hotel lobby:

"The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable."

In a Leipzig elevator:

"Do not enter the lift backwards, and only when lit up."

In a Belgrade hotel elevator:

"To more the cabin, push button for wishing floor. If the cabin should enter more persons, each one should press a number of wishing floor. Driving is then going alphabetically by national order."

In a hotel in Athens:

"Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 A.M. daily."

In the lobby of a Moscow hotel across from a Russian Orthodox monastery:

"You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists, and writers are buried except Thursday."

In an Austrian hotel catering to skiers:

"Not to perambulate the corridors in the hours of repose in the boots of ascension."

On the menu of a Polish hotel:

"Salad a firm's own make; limp red beet soup with cheesy dumplings in the form of a finger; roasted duck let loose; beef rashers beaten up in the country people's fashion."

Outside a Paris dress shop:

Some editors are failed writers,
but so are most writers.
-- T. S. Eliot



"Dresses for street walking."

In a Bangkok dry cleaners:

"Drop your trousers here for best results."

A sign posted in Germany's Black Forest:

"It is strictly forbidden on our black forest camping site that people of different sex, for instance, men and women, live together in one tent unless they are married with each other for that purpose."

In a Zurich hotel:

"Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedroom, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose."

On the door of a Moscow hotel room:

"If this is your first visit to the USSR, you are welcome to it."

In a Tokyo shop:

"Our nylons cost more than common, but you'll find they are best in the long run."

From a Japanese information booklet about using a hotel air conditioner:

"Cooler and Heater: If you want just condition of warm in your room, please control yourself."

From a brochure of a car rental firm in Tokyo:

"When passenger of foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet him melodiously at first, but if he still obstructs your passage then tootle him with vigor."

Online Instructor, continued from page 5

Distance learning (which brings in more revenues and drastically lowers overhead costs) is just one way of generating revenue. Although strict constructionist academics will deny it, for the rest of us it's just good business.

You didn't ask this question, but I want you and your readers to know that I love being an instructor of technical communication. It seemed a natural step after 15 or so years of experience. I was looking for new challenges and was offered this opportunity to teach others what I'd learned mostly through trial and error (although I had a brilliant mentor when I started my career as a technical writer). Teaching doesn't pay much, but the personal satisfaction and rewards that come from working with eager learners make my days shine.

Denise Passmore
Database Manager
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Tampa, FL 33612



Mission Statement

To improve the quality and effectiveness
of technical communication
for audiences worldwide.

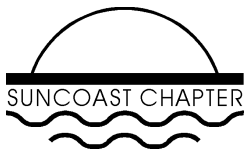
WriteUp

<http://www.stc.org/region3/sun/www/>

Shannon Haynes, Online Edition

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Calendar of Events

Subject to Change

**Copy Deadline for
Next Issue:
July 10**

June 1	Suncoast Chapter Planning Meeting and Annual Conference Highlights Verifone, a division of Hewlett Packard 6:30 PM
June 17	Suncoast Administrative Council Retreat Verifone, a division of Hewlett Packard 10:00 AM
July 6	Suncoast Summer Social Location TBD 6:30 PM