



IDeal: Design for Learning

Newsletter of the Instructional Design & Learning SIG

<http://www.stcidlsig.org>

SIG MANAGER'S THOUGHTS

by [Jackie Damrau](#), SIG Manager



Hello everyone!

Fall is here already!
Where did the year go?

I've spent my professional time on projects that have recently required me to travel more

than I've ever done in my three years with my employer. Road warrior is fun, yet exhausting. Of course, I've been able to stay at "great" hotels and "not-so-great" hotels. Those of you who travel know exactly what I mean, I'm sure.

For the SIG, I've been working with the Program committee on delivering discussion calls and Web seminars. The first discussion call took place in October with Neil Perlin talking about help authoring tools. The first Web seminar will be one of our own members, Robert Brown, talking about using virtual environments for training. I've also been working with the Web committee on setting direction for updating the Web site.

Both of these committees can use additional volunteers, so if you have a desire to learn about these areas, raise

your hand to let them know that you are available. For Programs, email programs@stcidlsig.org; for Web, email webmanager@stcidlsig.org or webmaster@stcidlsig.org.

I'm interested in hearing what you, the SIG members, would like to see the SIG do in the next few months. Drop me a line at manager@stcidlsig.org and let me know what you would like. I'm also available to talk with you by phone, just coordinate a time that we can get together.

Otherwise, as the holidays are nearing, I plan on spending time with my family. I'm thankful that my family is all finally in the same city where I can visit more often. We've always managed to live hundreds of miles from each other for the past 26 years. It'll be nice to share the holidays with them.

And as always, I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving and a Happy Holiday season as this year slowly winds down. Another year soon starts which will see the SIG gearing up for its annual conference planning sessions. Be looking for the emails asking for your input.

Jackie



by [Robert Hershenow](#)

Welcome to the Fall issue. I hope this finds you happily employed at a fulfilling job, doing something you love to do. If it doesn't, you may be like me: another once-dedicated worker suddenly among the ranks of the unemployed.

This was the second surprise layoff in my career. Fortunately I'd put in enough time to earn some severance pay, and medical insurance is available for us through my wife's company. We're lucky for that.

Besides its financial impact, being laid off can deliver a hard blow to the ego. But to someone leaving an imperfect work situation it can also bring relief. At first this may not be apparent, but as each perennially nagging problem raises its head and you realize that you can dismiss it forever you begin to feel a lot better. I was surprised at how many untenable situations I was lugging around in my subconscious; now all of them belong to someone else!

If this sounds like you, then I say you've earned a break. Do something! Celebrate! Hop on the motorcycle and take a road trip, or leave town for a weekend, or treat the family to a nice dinner out. After awhile your spouse may mention how good it is to have you back. The cat may even stop hiding when you enter the room.

Eventually, however, the euphoria will wear off... because you'll probably have to find another job. It's often true that looking for work is the hardest work of any, but a little proactive effort can help ease the pain. Take care of yourself: get enough sleep and exercise, and eat well. After a suitable period of mourning, don't spend all day on the couch. Get up in the morning, get dressed, shave. Fix your



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SIG Mission Statement

To help STC members identify and develop knowledge and practical skills for designing, developing, and implementing technical instruction in electronic and traditional classroom settings. The SIG strives to promote sound design practices, provide information, and educate about instructional theory and research.

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hair. Get out of the house for awhile every day, and stay in touch with people—friends and family can help keep your spirits up (and feed you, and maybe watch the kids while you're on an interview). Your business contacts can keep you abreast of what's happening in your field. And don't forget that your network offers your best chances for finding quality employment.

If you're working, be prepared. I wasn't. When I returned to my office to pack up my books I found my computer disabled—I had no access to anything on it or the network. Sure, I understood company policy: the computer was theirs, not mine, and it was only to be used for company business. But after nine mostly comfortable years, mine had both personal and work data in happy coexistence. I told myself I ought to clean it up, but there was always something more important to do so I kept putting it off. And I lost contact information, e-books, personal e-mail, photos, programs, and all the rest. Next time around I won't be so careless.

IN THIS ISSUE

Betsy Richards' article "Will Write For Money: Tips on Finding Work" is quite timely for at least one of us; it offers a wealth of good information for job seekers. Ann Gordon describes the how and why of creating an online portfolio, and, in our feature article, Robert Krull relates the 50-year history of education in technical communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I hope you enjoy this issue, and I wish you a happy Holiday season!

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FEATURE ARTICLE:

Fifty Years of Education in Technical Communication: Trends in Technology and Instructional Processes

By Robert Krull, *STC Associate Fellow*

In the 1950s Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute started offering one of the first programs in the world that provided education in technical communication aimed at working professionals. As technologies and industry needs evolved, so did RPI's platform for delivering education and its instructional processes. Through systematic maintenance of contacts with industry and through evaluation of student response to our programs, RPI has been able to keep its on-campus and distance education programs abreast of industry trends.

RPI's experience is not dissimilar from the experiences of other universities that provide distance education. RPI has, however, analyzed its educational programs in ways that could provide interesting information for other universities and for corporations that provide distance training.

Technological Evolution. RPI has used many technologies to reach out to working professionals:

- Face-to-face classes
- A five-day on-campus writing workshop
- Courses delivered live at writers' worksites
- Courses delivered to worksites via satellite television, with distance students able to make comments via telephone

- Recorded class lectures delivered by CD-ROM to inaccessible sites such as ships at sea
- Video conferencing for two-way delivery of content
- Video streaming for downstream delivery of content
- Asynchronous delivery via the Web
- Multiple media with downstream video, bi-directional audio, and virtual whiteboards

We transitioned among media for a variety of reasons, but not all transitions improved all aspects of instruction. We dropped the five-day writing workshop--though we had offered it for 40 years--because we could see that corporations were no longer willing to support employees' absence from work for several days and at considerable expense. Professional associations seem to be facing similar resistance now. Will live conferences be viable in the future, or will professional associations need to move to some mixture of live conferences and access via distance technologies for people who are not able to travel to conferences?

RPI taught courses at worksites until it clearly became impractical for faculty to continue to travel on a weekly basis. We started electronic delivery as an experimental substitute for live classes.

Our trial satellite courses were sufficiently workable that we stopped traveling to corporate sites. Satellite delivery does have disadvantages, though. Students could see and hear instructors, but instructors could not see students. Instructors could hear students if students called the live classroom on the telephone, but students didn't always have access to telephones during class. Because instructors weren't getting feedback from students, they were less able to tune their delivery to students' needs. And then there was a problem at the end of one semester when the satellite disappeared from the sky. Mailing out CD-ROMs was a stop-gap means of compensating for the lost satellite and also a way to deliver content to students without satellite connections. Military ships at sea were an example of the latter. Of course, CD-ROM delivery meant that students couldn't even call instructors during classes to ask questions.

RPI added video conferencing as soon as that technology became available. Our most complex course taught students live on campus, plus 70 distance students at 14 sites who were electronically connected either by satellite or video conferencing. This course with a total of 90 students was beyond a number that seems easily manageable. Just having students do short introductions would have required more than one class period.

For about two years subsequent courses used mainly videoconferencing. The primary educational advantage of videoconferencing is that instructors and students can see and hear each

other. Some disadvantages are that the upstream images of students can be unclear, that there is a time delay between when someone speaks and others see movement and hear the voice, that instructors may just see one or two distance sites at any one time, and that the system is expensive for corporations. Yet videoconferencing provided advantages in delivering synchronous images and sound compared to many Web-based systems in use ten years later.

With the reluctance of corporations to support video conferencing and an increase in the number of self-supporting, but impecunious individual students, RPI was forced to give up video conferencing and to move delivery to the Web. First, we recapitulated the experience of satellite delivery by pushing compressed video over the Internet. Instructors again could be seen and heard, and students could again be heard only if they called classrooms on the telephone. A new problem, though, was that the time delays produced by video compression/decompression placed downstream video and upstream telephone calls out of sync by up to a minute. Few students bothered to call on the phone unless instructors specifically set aside time for student to call in. Because feedback from students is so important, instructors did and still do make that time.

A second change after video conferencing was that we used the Web to host archives of recorded video streams, class notes, sample exams, and so on. Though not ideal, this system held enough appeal that even

on-campus students started to skip live classes and to watch the video stream from home. At least, that is what we hoped they were doing. Instructors started using inducements to keep on-campus students coming to live classes so that true distance students would have someone to watch other than just an isolated instructor.

When real-time Web platforms such as Elluminate and Macromedia Breeze (now Adobe Connect) became available, RPI offered those in parallel with video streaming. This combination of media has brought us back to approximately where we were with video conferencing ten years ago. Instructors and students can hear each other via Voice over IP (VOIP), students can always see instructors and instructors can sometimes see students, and students can produce workshop reports that they can share via the virtual whiteboard. The expense of technology has been reduced and time delays have been reduced, though not eliminated.

Throughout this arc of technological development we have been able to educate students and to help them to be more productive at work. As instructors we have also discovered instructional techniques that students generated on their own, as described in the next section. Without listening to distance students and watching them work, our instruction could not have been as effective as it is.

Improvements in Distance Education Through Listening to Students

Universities use end-of-semester questionnaires to gather feedback from

students regarding the quality of instruction they have received. Since distance students are less able to provide feedback to instructors, and since RPI has modified its course support platform so frequently, we have added several other forms of evaluation.

RPI's distance education office asks students to perform a mid-semester evaluation similar to the end-of-semester evaluation. In addition to that, we have developed a lengthy questionnaire for courses offered by our department. Initially produced by two distance students (William Wetmore and Louis Ruggiero) for a course project, the questionnaire has been updated to reflect changes in our instructional technology and to make it simpler to fill out. We have also run remote laboratory testing last spring to look in detail at challenges distance students face when carrying out and reporting on class workshops. A full description of these data collection systems is beyond the scope of this article, but I can briefly summarize our results.

Distance education can be made to work with many technologies. This finding is not surprising to instructional designers but can be news to people unfamiliar with distance education. Because distance education can seem to lack so many attributes of face-to-face instruction, it may also seem bound to fail. At RPI we have found that, with effort on the part of students and faculty, there are ways to compensate for the shortcomings of distance technologies.

Students and instructors prefer better distance technologies as soon as they are available. Instructors and students prefer legible images, clear audio, short time delays, the capacity for students and instructors to see and hear each other, and so on. For example, during remote laboratory tests we offered distance students full-duplex audio as an alternative to text chat for interaction. The students immediately switched to audio. They said that, though text chat worked adequately during regular classes, the ability to have multiple microphones continuously enabled during workshops made it much easier for them to manage their interaction. We would expect students to prefer full-time video in some cases, were that to be available.

Technology that works on a small scale can be problematic when scaled up. This finding applies to many distance technologies. For example, text chat and full-duplex audio both become problematic as classes get larger. If 60 students were to try to type text into a single chat session, there would likely be many topic threads and no one would be able to link statements to their responses. When even 20 students try to use full-duplex audio, it can be very difficult to tell who is talking and what the referent is for comments. The solutions to these and similar problems are not purely technical.

Participation etiquettes are very important to maintaining sensible interactions and optimal learning. Participation etiquette can be maintained non-verbally in face-to-face classrooms. For example, students can

raise their hands if they want to speak and several workshop groups can work in the same classroom if their members speak in low voices. Physical separation makes the same control over interaction more difficult in a distance classroom. Some distance platforms allow students to trigger a raised-hand icon on an instructor's computer. Our research at RPI suggests that students are loathe to use that system if their raising their hand also triggers an audible sound that all others hear and that interrupts classroom interaction. Students also don't want to use that system if there are long time delays in their receiving content, during which the class has progressed well beyond the topic about which a student wants to make a comment.

Multiple workshops also can present problems. Some distance platforms don't support multiple, simultaneous workshops or don't make it easy to transfer information from the separate workshops to the class as a whole. In addition, students working within workshop groups have some of the same problems in managing workshop interactions as in whole-class interactions. Who controls the group whiteboard, who supplies comments about what is typed onto the whiteboard, and how can several points of view be integrated into the same report?

Without some decisions about the roles of participants and the means available for them to communicate, classroom and workshop interactions will remain awkward and dissatisfying.

Distance Platforms Are Brittle. Our feedback from students has shown that

they find existing distance software to be less reliable than other commercial software. Distance software takes a lot longer to get running for each usage session than does a word processor.

Distance software also may break down frequently, especially for newly added features. For example, our remote laboratory tests showed that the VOIP audio for one commercial product broke down over 90 percent of the time within an hour and with only three to four users. Though this audio function was loved by all when it worked, it never worked reliably enough to be counted on.

On-campus and distance students work in parallel universes. All is not black for distance education, however. In some ways the distance environment is better than the face-to-face environment. Distance students report being engaged in what we at RPI have started calling the “parallel universe”. Distance students’ peer-to-peer interaction during classes is more frequent than that of face-to-face students. This is because distance students can share commentary by using text chat; face-to-face students would interrupt live interaction if they started a secondary discussion during class time. Some face-to-face students have found this parallel, peer-to-peer path so valuable that they behave during class as if they were distance students - playing a full-time role within the distance text chat sessions.

Through methods such as parallel chat, distance students in some instances have gotten to know each other better than face-to-face students do. Distance students also report that faculty members go out of their way to provide timely responses to student inquiries. They perceive this kind of support to be greater than what they would receive if they were physically present in the classroom each week.

The Past and the Future in Technical Communication Distance Education

Our 50 years of professional education at RPI is likely to sound familiar to others who have performed similar service. We have done far less traveling and much more with distance technologies. Distance technologies have become cheaper and have provided more comprehensive functions. Distance technologies also are not yet at a level of reliability and ease of use typical of some other commercial software.

Based on our experience at RPI, I would expect the same trend to continue in the future. As we add multi-source video we still will be struggling with brittle software and the need to manage our interactions with etiquettes that compensate for technological shortcomings. We can, though, make these systems work well enough to substitute for travel and to educate professionals to their satisfaction.

Robert Krull is Professor of Communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and an Associate Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication. He conducts research on electronic performance support and distance education systems. He has taught Electronic Coaching Systems and Communication Research Methods in RPI's master's programs in Technical Communication and in Human-Computer Interaction.

Building an Online Portfolio

By Ann Gordon, IDL SIG Member and Owner, Gordon Computer LLC



Introduction

An online portfolio is a digital (electronic) portfolio that is posted on the Internet. Online (or Web-based) portfolios contain links to various electronic files, including Word or PDF documents, graphics or multimedia clips

that showcase the owner's skills and accomplishments.

Students, business owners, writers, contractors and artists use online portfolios to provide evidence of their creativity, achievements, and abilities to various stakeholders, including recruiters, supervisors, clients and potential customers.

Purpose

Technical communicators use representational portfolios to back up their resume claims. A well-planned portfolio exclaims, "Hey, I have done this for others ... I can do the same for you." In fact, an portfolio can be just as strong a marketing tool as the resume.

The ultimate goal of an online portfolio is the same as a portfolio assembled in an envelope or a binder: Portfolios are designed to showcase your past work. But the online portfolio provides quick, convenient and universal access to your creations because an online portfolio is ready for the moment you need it. All you have to do is send a link to your prospective client.

Benefits

An online portfolio is eminently accessible and doesn't require postage. One of the most compelling benefits of an online portfolio is that interviewers and potential clients can thoroughly review your portfolio prior to your interview. This is much better than the scenario where the interviewer's first exposure to your samples comes during the actual interview.

Reviewing portfolios during an interview can lead to awkward silences, cursory page-flipping, and lack of focus on interview questions.

Online portfolios just may do their best work when you are not around. Prospective employers and clients can look at your work at their convenience; it's like having a personal salesperson working for you when you're not there. Having an online portfolio to view ahead of a face-to-face meeting can lead to targeted interview questions that enable you to expound on specific assignments and skills.

In addition, online portfolios demonstrate your familiarity with computer technology.

Pointers

Here are some tips for building your online portfolio:

1. Plan your online portfolio before you start to build it. Create a storyboard or a mockup, blueprinting what you want to post and where you want to post it. Group related or similar items.
2. Judiciously and carefully pick your domain name, which will become your website address. As with the fonts, don't try to be cute. I realize that most of the truly elegant domain names are already taken, but keep trying new combinations. When searching for available domain names, I use

- networksolutions.com, dotster.com or namedroppers.com.
3. Make sure your HTML is clean. People looking at your online portfolio just might decide to view the page code, looking to see just how clean and organized your pages are “under the hood.” If you don’t know how to write clean code, I suggest hiring someone who does.
 4. Don’t get fancy with your fonts. Use common fonts like Times New Roman, Georgia, Verdana, Arial, Helvetica, etc. I have found that the conservative approach never offends.
 5. Reduce picture sizes. I don’t suggest thumbnails because they are small and inconvenient. In this age of diminished available time, you can post a relatively good size of the picture but not full size. Full size pictures may not take time to load (with fast Internet connections) but they take time to scroll past. If your online resume gets ten minutes, you are lucky; it’ll probably only get one to three minutes.
 6. No matter what version of Flash you use to create Flash presentations, set them to Flash 5 for posting on the Internet. No matter how seldom someone upgrades their browser, they should at least have the Flash 5 plug-in.
 7. Learn about Meta-tags, those key words in the HTML tags that only Internet search engines can see. Search engines have subscribed to a stringent set of rules regarding what they will count and what they will discount regarding meta-tags. You can take a virtually free course about writing meta-tags from Virtual University at www.vu.org.
 8. Set your sample documents, pictures or movies to open in a new browser window. This way, the client can see what you want them to see, but your online resume / portfolio remains open in the background. You don’t want your prospective employer or client to lose track of your main website. I use JavaScript so that I can control what the pop-up window looks like. Virtual University also offers an elementary course in JavaScript.
 9. Do not waffle as you write. No wordiness allowed on the Internet. People may spend hours playing online games or reading sports news, but when reading something dry like a resume or portfolio, most people have little patience. They want to get in and get out. Remember those basic business writing Cs - concreteness, clarity, conciseness.
 10. Post your online portfolio with a website host that allots the bandwidth you’ll need. Free and bargain hosts offer plenty of space to post your files, but generally don’t offer enough bandwidth for opening your attachments. Double-check the bandwidth offered by the website host.
 11. Frames versus tables: Use tables. You can build a website with tables that looks like a frames website, if you like that look. Why not frames? Two reasons: Because you cannot send someone a link to a specific page when you build your site with frames, and because frames webpages are not friendly to search engines. So master CSS (cascading stylesheets) or use tables for building websites that draw traffic.
 12. Do not run your text from one side of the browser window all the way to the other side. Use table columns to tame your text. It has been proven that people do not want to read overly wide lines of text - not in a book or a magazine or online.
 13. Test your website. Enlist friends and relatives to test your new online portfolio with different computers (Windows XP, Windows Vista, Macintosh) and different browsers. Internet Explorer may be the most common browser, but others such as Netscape

and Mozilla Firefox are popular and preferred by many.

14. Consider giving something away. I encourage technical communicators to take the time to post something on their site that is informational or educational... white papers or technical writing exercises or tips and pointers - some information that you are just giving away. You'll be pleasantly surprised by the emails you'll receive thanking you for the free information you've provided.

Summary

A portfolio is not just a collection of samples of your work; it is a sales tool that can actively land you that next job or contract. A good online portfolio provides proof that you can deploy the theory and practice of technical communication to solve a company's problems.

On first consideration, building an online portfolio may seem daunting, but ultimately it will reduce the time and expense associated with maintaining and distributing your portfolio. The benefits of an online portfolio include portability, the ease with which it can be updated, the ability for prospective employers to review your portfolio prior to an interview, the opportunity to show functional (multimedia) examples of your skills, and reduced production costs.

Ann Gordon is the owner of Gordon Computing, LLC, in Moab, Utah. She is also Survey Manager for the IDL SIG.



We'd Like Your Input!

Thought Leader Interviews

From time to time we publish interviews with leaders and innovators in the field of Instructional Design, and we invite these people based on input from our membership. Who would you like to hear from? Let us know, and we'll contact them.

Articles

Most of our articles are written by members... why not you? One of the best things about our SIG community is that we can all benefit from each other's experience.

Tips and Hints

There's more than one way to do just about anything, and maybe your way is the next big thing. Or maybe it's just better than my way. Got a favorite process that saves you time every day? Why not share it?

Letters to the Editor

How do you like the IDeaL newsletter? How could we make it better? Was there an article or feature you enjoyed (or didn't)? Tell us about it!

Send your comments, requests, or opinions to newsletter@stcidlsig.org.

WILL WRITE FOR MONEY...

Tips on Finding Work

By Betsy Richards, IDL SIG Member

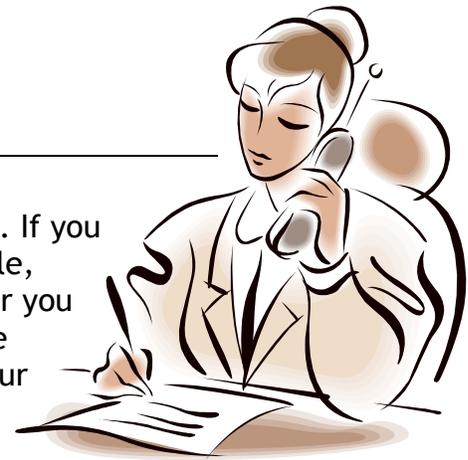
If the layoffs have finally hit you, or are about to, welcome to the club! It is a prestigious club with many talented and dedicated members these days. Chances are, things have changed a lot since the last time you had to look for a job. I will share with you what I've learned the hard way the past four years in my own search to find a permanent and sustaining job.

First things first. Get a notebook and title it "Career". If you're working now, get names and numbers of people in your office you can use for networking or as a reference. Make special notes so a year or two from now you will remember who people are. Start thinking like this: "This could be my last day here. Do I have what I need to have? Do I know what I need to know?"

If the axe does fall, try to find out as much as you can about why you are being terminated, who made the decision, and what your part was in all that. Accept the employer's decision, set emotions aside, and be open-minded to learn what you can about the factors that led to your termination. Make notes about what you learned in your Career notebook.

Go directly to your local Department of Labor office (or go online at www.servicelocator.org/OWSLinks.asp) and file an unemployment claim. In most states, you don't need a termination letter to apply. You can get

that later. If you are eligible, the sooner you apply, the sooner your benefits get started from the day you file your claim, not the day your employment ended.



Secure ready access to high-speed Internet. Sounds simple, but there are still some of us who live in rural areas where DSL is not available. You cannot do effective job search via dial-up access. Many career sites will time out by the time you load in all the requested data and click "submit". Many libraries now offer Internet access, but they often impose time limits. Most universities now offer free wi-fi on campus, if you are a student or alumnus. I settled on a regional fast-food chain that serves good coffee, is open from 6 a.m. to midnight, and provides free, reliable wi-fi.

Get your resume in order. It should be already, because you should be updating your resume on the job every time anything significant changes (for example if you receive training or start a new major project). During your job search, you will submit many versions of your resume, each tailored to the position for which it is intended. Find a

way to name and manage the variations on your PC.

Here are some key resume tips:

- Don't include any personal data in your resume other than your first and last name, an email address you use only for job hunting, and a cell phone number. Criminals have taken to mining data out of resumes posted on job boards.
- Put technology and job skills at the top of the resume, not the bottom.
- For probably every job for which you will apply, you must post your resume online.
- Length is debatable. Recruiters and consultants like to see more, so two or even three pages may be OK. HR folks probably want less.

Re-evaluate your financial goals, expenses, and personal life. Think about what's really important and downsize your personal life now. It might be some time before you find another suitable job in your area of expertise. If your personal life requires high overhead, give some serious thought to finding new hobbies—and maybe even a new neighborhood. What seems like a good cushion now won't look so thick if you are still looking for work nine months from now. Log your new list of life priorities and goals in your Career notebook.

Educate yourself. If your job is not keeping you current with technology, use your own time to get current. Most employers expect communicators to have skills in HTML and Web design. Flash and DreamWeaver are big winners. SharePoint, MS Office, CMS (customer management systems),

servers, and knowledge bases also win points.

The job market is flooded with un- and under-employed workers. Those with the most education usually win. Six years ago, a master's degree did not significantly improve a mature career portfolio. Today, most corporations require at least a bachelor's degree for any white collar job. If you want to stand above the crowd, a master's makes a good pair of stilts.

Language changes, and so do job titles. Search career sites for job titles and descriptions. You may be surprised at some of the title changes, and at some jobs for which you wouldn't think you'd be qualified until you read the description closely. Log these job titles in your Career notebook.

So, you received a bachelor's degree in technical writing in 1984. Great. What have you done or learned recently that will impress a potential employer? Check out some online certification options, such as www.brainbench.com. Resources like this one can help you determine what you know, what you need to know, and what you can get certified in now to help beef up your resume.

Network. You've heard it a thousand times before. Now hear it again: Network. It's not what you know that counts so much as whom you know. Those are very true words in this tough job market. Join a support group, a job-search networking group, or a professional organization. The group does not have to represent your field. In fact, when the market is really tough, your professional kin may be the worst

place to put your energy when you are all competing for the same handful of jobs. Call former employees and associates who liked you. Direct a lot of your networking to employed people whose jobs and career opportunities do not compete with yours. Keep a log of these contacts in your Career notebook. **Don't be a victim.** Criminals abound in the job-search arena. They often operate by soliciting you to apply for a purported position on their bogus (but very real-looking) Web sites to obtain your personal data so they can steal your money and identity. Before entering data on any site, give the site a thorough tour and assure yourself that it has the elements of a valid corporate business Web site, like valid contact information and links that really work. Cross-check the contact information to make sure it is legitimate.

Being out of work for an extended time can wear on the toughest of us. Even so, keep your whining and fears close to home. Nobody likes a complainer, no matter how legitimate your complaints might be. Be creative and build a positive persona to see yourself through, even when you want to give it up. Instead of saying you are out of work, say you are a consultant looking for the next great opportunity to grace with your talent.

Post your resume. The best places to post your resume are career pages on corporate Web sites. Research which companies have potential positions for you, and post your resume and portfolio on their sites. Post soon and post often. If you have multiple areas of expertise, open an account for each skill area. If you try to cover all of your talents in one profile, human resources

might overlook you, not believing one person could be that good at all of those skills.

Don't wait for the phone to ring. Visit job listing sites regularly and search for a match. Most job sites allow you to set up job agents (programs that will e-mail you when the system finds a match).

All resume posting sites have some required fields, one of which is your zip code. With some of the worst roadway traffic in the country, Atlanta employers want their workers to live close by. If your primary residence is quite a commute from the potential job, you might want to find a secondary address to post on the site.

Job boards like Monster are also great places to post your resume and portfolio. Take advantage of posting multiple accounts and setting up job agents to notify you of possible matches. Remember, though: don't wait for the job to find you. Be proactive. Search job opportunities regularly and, wherever possible, avoid the recruiters by posting directly on the company's career site.

Follow these tips for submitting resumes online:

- Compose a cover letter for each submission.
- Keep track of requisition numbers so you don't apply twice to the same job.
- Log each submission in your Career notebook.
- Be ready to respond immediately if called for an interview. This is what recruiters and clients expect.
- Don't hold your breath. Keep looking and applying. What sounds like a

sure thing may evaporate for no apparent reason.

- Refresh, update, and edit your online resume frequently. As the last edited date grows stale, your chances of getting seen and called diminish.

Warning! Once your resume is posted on job boards, the IT recruiters will find it and start calling you. Like used car salespersons, many of them promise the moon and deliver flashlights.

Remember, their interest is to find the best bargain for their clients and get a percentage of the amount billed. It doesn't matter to them whom they find for the job. If not you, there are plenty of others to be that person. Most recruiters have little knowledge about our profession and little concern about the quality of our skills.

Don't overvalue yourself out of the market. Maybe you're accustomed to \$50 an hour or more. These days, it is not uncommon to see job description asking for the moon and offering \$22 an hour. It's a big step down, but it's better than the empty set - zero - nada - nothing. When a better opportunity comes along, that low pay rate you accepted can be your secret. This is not the time to be too proud - or too

humble. Do what you need to do to keep yourself in the game!

I have identified a handful of professional consulting firms in my area that cater to communicators. These firms are owned and managed by competent technical communicators who understand and value our skill sets and who have good business sense and ethics. They specialize in providing writing, editing, training development, Web design, and other such services of our trade. Find out who the good ones are in your area, and take the time to make friends with them. Avoid the run-of-the-mill IT and technology recruiters, the fly-by-nights, and the scammers. You may thus save yourself a lot of headache and heartache in the long run.

Unless you need the motivation, you probably don't need to pay a professional resume-writing and career-search firm. There's no magic in what they do. Instead, spend that time and money building your own Web site to post and demonstrate your skills. Above all, keep your balance and your sense of humor. When the right opportunity does come along, you want to look and feel your best.

Betsy Richards is working on her master's degree in technical communication at Southern Polytechnic State University, outside Atlanta GA. She has 23 years experience in technical writing and instructional design as a self-employed consultant and as an employee. Since the market shake-up that followed 9/11, she has gained a wealth of experience in looking for work in today's challenging market and has seen a number of her colleagues move on to other professions and vocations.

GUI Bloopers 2.0: Common User Interface Design DON'Ts and DOs By Jeff Johnson

Book Review by David Dick

Once upon a time, graphical user interfaces (GUI) were found only in operating systems for PCs. Today, we are confronted with a GUI when we use self-service checkout counters, when we pay bills online, and when we use our mobile phones, to name a few examples. Whether we can complete our transactions or accomplish our tasks depends on having a GUI that is easy to use and easy to understand. No doubt you have seen people confused with the touch-screen menu at the self-service checkout counter, or abandon their online shopping cart because the form is confusing. You may well have chosen a competitor's brand of income tax preparation software because it is easier to use. Frustrated users mean lost income and products that fail in the market place. When GUI's fail, that's when companies call a user interface designer like Jeff Johnson to change poor design into great design.

The first edition of *GUI Bloopers* heralded Johnson's first work as a book author. *GUI Bloopers* was intended for software developers who often work double as user interface designers, development managers, and new user interface designers. But *GUI Bloopers* also gained popularity among teachers and technical writers who wanted to understand the rules of good user interface design. Readers' feedback, new software products and Web applications on the market inspired Johnson to write an updated version—*GUI Bloopers 2.0*.

GUI Bloopers 2.0 describes common user-interface mistakes found in today's software products and services, and provides design rules and guidelines to avoid them. Johnson describes the design decisions that lead to misuse of controls, poor navigation, prose-riddled labels, bad

design and layout, faulty interaction, and poor responsiveness. *GUI Bloopers 2.0* is well illustrated with hundreds of examples from real products and online services, and stories from his own experience. To compare and contrast good and bad design, Johnson gives a "thumbs up" for good design and a "thumbs down" for a blooper.

The book contains the following chapters:

Chapter 1, *First Principles*, describes nine principles of product design: focus on the users and their tasks, not on the technology; consider function first and presentation later; conform to the users' view of the task; design for the common case; don't complicate the users' task; facilitate learning; deliver information and not just data; design for responsiveness; and try it out on users and then fix it. Too often, the rush to deliver products means ignoring one or more of these principles. Johnson could have omitted this chapter and jumped right into describing GUI bloopers, but it provides an informational foundation for the discussion of bloopers.

Chapter 2, *GUI Control Bloopers*, is the first of six chapters dedicated to GUI design details. It describes the most common misuses of controls (i.e. checkboxes, tabs, input fields and buttons) and how to avoid them.

Chapter 3, *Navigation Bloopers*, emphasizes the importance of cues to let people know where they are, where they have been, and where they can go. This chapter describes the most common navigation mistakes and how to design effective navigation cues.

Chapter 4, *Textual Bloopers*, describes how inconsistent and unclear terminology, poor writing, jargon, and misleading text can

confuse users. The typical GUI contains a lot of text, and if it's poorly written, users can easily get lost. Peer reviews of the user interface by developers do not uncover these errors if they cannot recognize them as confusing. For example, an error message that describes a script error is informative to a developer but meaningless to a user, -. Johnson offers suggestions for educating development teams about good writing and acceptable terminology, and how to conduct reviews to identify textual bloopers.

Once the GUI controls have been added, properly labeled and any supplemental text has been written, it is time to decide on presentation: layout, colors, and text fonts. Chapter 5, *Graphic Design and Layout Bloopers*, presents guidelines on layout and window placement, colors, and text fonts. You will learn valuable presentation guidelines that will make user interface easier to read and understand. Unfortunately, Johnson was unable to provide examples of bloopers showing poor use of color because the book is printed in black and white. However, he covers color bloopers in a Web Appendix at www.gui-bloopers.com.

Chapter 6, *Interaction Bloopers*, is the first of two chapters that describe the mechanics that underlie the user interface. In this chapter, Johnson presents the user interface design principles that affect human perception, reading, information processing, and problem solving. The chapter clarifies why violating these principles results in a software product that is hard to learn and frustrating to use. Some of the design mistakes covered in this chapter are driven by business rules and processes mandated by clients and corporate policy. If those business rules and processes do not contribute to usability, this chapter will educate you on how to make an argument for improving interaction.

Chapter 7, *Responsiveness Bloopers*, is the second chapter that deals with the mechanics that underlie the user interface design. In this chapter, Johnson describes the reasons for poor responsiveness and the design principles for improving responsiveness. Before I read this chapter, I assumed that sticky buttons, frozen cursors, and lagging scrollbars (to name a few) meant that my PC was too slow. After reading this chapter, I learned not to confuse responsiveness with performance.

Chapter 8, *Management Bloopers*, describes management misconceptions and mistakes that lead to poor product usability. Other authors have dedicated whole books to management-level problems that affect usability. Johnson could have easily omitted this chapter and listed those books as references. However, he does not just rant about why poor management leads to poor usability; he provides strategies and suggestions to educate management about usability.

GUI Bloopers 2.0 is supplemented by a Web site, www.gui-bloopers.com, which provides the following information:

GUI Bloopers checklist: a check list of all of the types of bloopers in the book to facilitate checking software before release.

Web Appendix: Color Bloopers: two bloopers about poor use of color that could not be included in the book because the book is not printed in color.

More bloopers: additional bloopers not included in the book, starting with bloopers that did not make the "final cut".

GUI Bloopers 2.0 earns my "two thumbs up". It is well written, well researched, and an essential resource for anyone developing software products and Web applications.



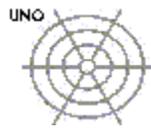
UNO

by Robert Hershenow

I discovered one of my favorite tools last spring when I picked up a handout at the STC's Technical

Communications Summit in Minneapolis. From Paul Borzo at Metropolitan State University in the Twin Cities, it's called **UNO** (the **UNiversal Organizer**).

UNO is a very easy-to-use method of recording your ideas, which imposes a natural hierarchy (much like an outline) to your project as you go along.



From the Web site:

“Organizing your paper or project is easy when you use UNO, the Universal Organizer. It's a very simple tool that helps you organize your thoughts or material by topic and by priority, giving structure and order to your paper through your natural thought process.

“Its intuitive structure encourages you to expound on your ideas, and then helps you present your thoughts in an organized and logical manner. You can organize your paper in a matter of minutes, and you see your progress as you write.”

Download UNO in PDF format [here](#)

What's in your toolbox? Write to newsletter@stcidlsig.com and tell us about your favorite tips, tricks, or tools for a future column.



Fang Fang, recipient of last year's IDL SIG Scholarship, is currently a Ph.D.

candidate in the Department of Instructional Systems Technology (IST), Indiana University. She has previously studied electronic media production and management, and online education.

Fang recently wrote to us about her research goals:

My primary research agenda has focused on designing and developing rich learning environments with the aid of technology innovations. Much of my work is applied in the context of online learning. In particular, I am interested in the topics on:

- The current status of applying Web 2.0, such as Wiki, blogs, and podcasting, in formal and informal learning settings.
- What are the potentials of gaming and simulation for assisting learners' social cognition.
- What are the positive and negative experiences in using technologies for fostering participatory learning.

Currently I am working a project that explores the sharing, transferring and building of knowledgebase in an online community of practice.

Online communities of practice are an instructional creature of a joint effort of social cognition and ever-advancing Web technologies. It builds a learning environment that enables people who are geographically and culturally remote to work together to generate new knowledge. The research of online

communities of practice has identified knowledge sharing as a crucial enabler of better learning outcomes. It fosters and promotes a culture of collaboration in communities and is positively related to the health growth of both individuals and communities. However, convincing people to share their knowledge is not an easy thing, because information providers may not benefit directly from serving their peers and there are potential increased costs to individuals who share their knowledge. Therefore, an incentive mechanism in community of practice is in need to motivate community members to contribute to a group's common welfare.

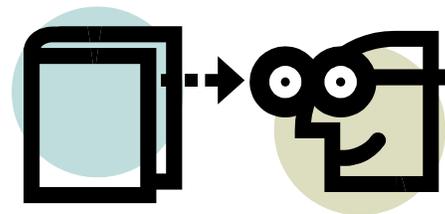
The purpose of my study is to seek for understanding on how people share their knowledge and why they want to share; in particular, two research questions are addressed:

- What makes up individual knowledge sharing behaviors?
- What are the motivating factors that encourage people to participate in knowledge sharing?

This paper uses a social constructivist case study approach to inquiry. Data collection and analysis are primarily qualitative in nature in order to focus progressively on interpreting the observed phenomena to answer the research questions. Mixed methods are used. A content analysis was conducted on discussion threads initiated and developed in a selected online community of practice to understand the knowledge sharing behaviors.

To identify motivational factors of knowledge sharing, three qualitative interviews of community members who are active in sharing will be conducted. This study can promote an understanding of knowledge sharing behavior particularly in the context of a professional online community. The findings of this study may inform instructors and instructional designers how to encourage knowledge sharing for individuals and communities to achieve their learning goals

Other projects on my agenda are to study the potentials of wikibooks for promoting participatory learning and the creation of an evaluation framework that can be used to assess wikibooks quality.



More Scholarship News

Preview of Coming Attractions

The IDL SIG Scholarship committee is wrapping up details about the 2007-2008 scholarship offerings. This year there will be two—one undergraduate and one graduate! Please watch your email and the IDL Web site for details.

By Cynthia Silversides

The Treasurer's Report shows our current balance is at \$8,327.65, as of October, 2007. If you have questions about this report, send an email to Jeanette Rogers: treasurer@stcidlsig.org.



The SIG has nominated one of its members for the the Distinguished SIG Service Award. Join us at the STC Annual Conference in Philadelphia to find out who it is!

Nina Murdoch has recently completed her tasks as Web manager and is now lending her expertise as our "Programs" Co-manager, helping with the production of our Web seminar activities. She will be helping Dawn Lofgren, the other Programs Co-manager, in putting on discussion calls and Web seminars. They will both be ably assisted by Maggie Haenel, who will continue to work with programs as needed. We just completed our first discussion call this past month with Neil Perlin's topic, "Review of Three Visual Help Authoring Tools" on October 26 (reviewed on the previous page—Ed.).

Join us on November 30th for a Web seminar with Robert Brown, IDL SIG member, who will present "The Virtue of Virtual - Using Virtual Environments to Develop and Deploy Training." Registration is currently being accepted. Visit the IDL SIG Web site (www.stcidlsig.org) for more program information, or send an email to Dawn Lofgren / Nina Murdoch: programs@stcidlsig.org.

January 15, 2008 is our scholarship deadline with judging to take place on

January 31, 2008. For additional scholarship information, send an email to Sylvia Miller / Ginnifer Mastarone: scholarships@stcidlsig.org.

Ann Gordon has been working on survey questions for IDL SIG members' input to forward to the IDL SIG committee leaders, that will include: "Are you interested in the SIG hosting an IDL-related conference, and if the SIG hosts such a conference, how much would you be willing to pay to attend this event?" Look for this survey to be available on our IDL Web site soon. You can send additional input to Ann: programs@stcidlsig.org.

In the works for our Web site are two wiki-like environments, one for Resources pages (Webliography) and the other for a Business Directory. You can now purchase archived Web seminars with our new shopping cart. Register online for an account. Purchase by PayPal to have immediate download access to your Web seminar, or purchase by check and you will have access to your Web seminar once our treasurer has received your check. Do you have questions about our Web site? Send an email to Chris Emanuelli: webmanager@stcidlsig.org.

Your ideas and involvement are always welcome! To get involved, send an email to one of us:

Jackie Damrau, SIG Manager:
manager@stcidlsig.org;

Karen Baranich, Asst. SIG Manager:
kbaranich@scana.com;

Gene Holden, Volunteers Manager:
volunteers@stcidlsig.org

Discussion Call Review

Visual Help Authoring Tools

By Robert Hershenow

Visual help is a growing part of a technical communicator's tool kit, and the existence of nearly thirty authoring tools is a sign of that growth. But how do you pick a tool? On October 26th the Instructional Design and Learning SIG hosted "Picking a Visual Help Authoring Tool"—an interactive discussion call



with long-time consultant Neil Perlin, owner of Hyper/Word Services in Massachusetts. Neil compared three popular

software tools (TechSmith Camtasia, Adobe Captivate, and MadCap Mimic) and provided not only guidance for those looking to obtain the best tool for their particular needs, but also general authoring tips and techniques.

Neil's years of experience in technical communication and his familiarity with these products (and the companies who provide them) made for an interesting hour. In fact, this call could easily have gone on longer. Those of us who attended gained not only a better understanding of the software but also some "insider" views of where these programs might be headed in the future—certainly worth considering before investing time and money in any platform.

This session was informative, fun, and a great bargain (at only \$15). Of the 16 registered attendees, nine called in. While this small number left room for everyone's questions, a larger crowd

might have been a bit more interesting. Still, all-in-all it, was well worth the time.

Visit Hyper/Word Services online (and don't miss Neil's Guide to Great BBQ Joints) at:

<http://www.hyperword.com/>

The Virtue of Virtual

– IDL SIG to Present Web Seminar

Rob Brown will present a live Web seminar, "The Virtue of Virtual - Using Virtual Environments to Develop and Deploy Training," from 11 AM to 12 PM Eastern Time on Friday, November 30, 2007. The seminar, produced by the Instructional Design and Learning (IDL) SIG, will provide an overview of virtual training environments and demonstrate how they can be used to dramatically reduce training costs, save student setup time, and improve course reliability.



Welcome to many new members who joined us over the past few months. The list of new members is

provided on page 23 of this newsletter. We hope to be reading about you in this column very soon!

Send your news to Kim Rosenlof and Katherine Baboulis, our Membership managers, at membership@stcidlsig.org



New STC Bylaws Approved

The STC 2007 Bylaws Referendum ended at noon EST on November 1, 2007. In total 802 votes were cast. Votes for the new bylaws: 775
 Votes against the new bylaws: 27
 The new Bylaws are posted online at http://www.stc.org/PDF_Files/bylaws.pdf.

Are You a Workaholic?

Web columnist Doug Davis explains this sometimes misunderstood term, why you don't want to be one, and what you can do about it if you are.

[STC Members click here](#)

More STC News:

<http://stcsig.org/idl/rss.php>

Intercom Online

The November 2007 Intercom features articles on adding animation to help files, telecommuting, DITA best practices, and much more. Get it here:

<http://www.stc.org/intercom>



STC Mission

The Society for Technical Communication advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and media.



STC offers opportunities to learn and improve your knowledge in technical communication and instructional design. Check out some of these opportunities to update your skill set, have fun, and increase your earning potential!

STC Live Web Seminar

Upgrade Your Career Using STC's Salary Database

Want to know if you are being compensated enough, or how your salary compares to other industries? STC has created the Salary Database using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Join economist Richard O'Sullivan as he presents the data and demonstrates how best to use it.

For more information, please visit

<http://www.stc.org/webinars/webinars.aspx>

IDL SIG Live Web Seminar

The Virtue of Virtual - Using Virtual Environments to Develop and Deploy Training

Rob Brown will present a live Web seminar from 11 AM to 12 PM Eastern Time on Friday, November 30, 2007. See details on the previous page.

The STC Academic Database

To assist those interested in pursuing a career in technical communication, STC provides a database of academic programs worldwide:

<http://stc.org/edu/academicDatabase01.asp>

New STC IDL SIG Members – June, July, and August 2007

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|--------------|----------------|----------|-----------------|
| Ryan | Anthony | Maura | Gudaitis | Colleen | Price |
| Leslie | Antley | Lynette | Halliday | Erin | Price |
| Kimberly | Babinski | Michele | Harrison | Jessica | Ramey |
| Brynn | Balmes | David | Haws | Danica | Rhoades |
| Jeremy | Boehl | Malcolm | Hays | Ashley | Rice |
| Stacy | Bridges | Jennifer | Hedegaard | cynthia | rudy |
| Gerry | Browder | Pamela Mason | Heller | Scott | Schmeling |
| Dawn | Bunting | Heidi | Heller | Irfana | Shakir |
| Kevin | Cardinelli | Vanda | Heuring | Alison | Shiple |
| Elisabeth | Carver | Kristen | Holmes | Perry | Shulak |
| Thomas | Chapman | Sandra | Kappes | Uma | Sivakumar |
| David | Cherney | R. | Karpov | Amber | Stanley |
| Veronica | Coone | Christine | Keefer | Amber | Stanley |
| Jori | Curry | Suzanne | Kelchner | Jennifer | Stencil |
| Kathy | Davie | Gabrielle | Kirsch | Shigeko | Takahashi |
| Lucas | Ecklund-Baker | Mark | Kondylis | Marjorie | Taylor |
| Ani | Ehlers | Manu | Kumar | Nicole | Teague |
| Robert | England | Charles | Lanigan | Valerie | Thomas |
| Michael | Espinosa | Harry | Lomas | Barb | Thurston |
| Jane | Francis | Margaret | Lynch-Freshner | Raquel | Torres Carvajal |
| Tara | French | Tristan | Macavery | Nancy | Vogelgesang |
| Richard | Froller | Rebecca | Marmaduke | Wayne | Wilcox |
| Olivia | Gistand | Daniel | Mehaffey | Kathleen | Wilson |
| Ashley | Gottfried-Quam | Darlene | Millender | Mo | Yang |
| Teri | Graves | Kathryn | Morgan-Nance | Jennifer | Younce |
| Cheryl | Greene | John | Morley | | |
| Evelyn | Griffin | Erin | Penner | | |