

The Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development: A Model for Developing Partnerships Between STC and Universities/Colleges

Christine Barabas Abbott

The Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development (IPD) is a good example of how STC chapters can help bridge the gap between theory and practice by partnering with colleges and universities to offer credit courses for those with little or no experience or prior course work in technical communication. Such partnerships help the local STC chapters by enhancing awareness of our profession in their geographic areas (and building STC membership and involvement), by serving the educational needs of its newer members, and by providing teaching and mentoring opportunities for its more experienced members. Above all, by bringing together teachers, researchers, and practitioners of technical communication to design, plan, and implement courses, the Chicago IPD models the very type of teamwork that has become essential for success in today's world.

INTRODUCTION

As George Hayhoe pointed out in *Technical Communication* a couple of years ago, there seems to be a growing distrust between those in the workplace who practice technical communication and those in academe who teach and study it. Essentially, the gap is the old one between practice (knowing how) and theory (knowing what and why). Thus, practitioners sometimes feel that academicians have their heads in the clouds and have difficulty bringing their research and theories to bear upon real-world writing situations; and, conversely, academicians sometimes feel that practitioners are too obsessed with a panoply of technology and quick-fix solutions to ever take time out to understand how theories, models, and research findings might help give them a solid basis for making informed decisions about their work.

In grappling with this challenge five years ago, a few members of the Education Committee of the Chicago chapter STC, of which I was a member, decided that they would try to develop a partnership between practicing professionals and area university professors in order to offer courses for those new or relatively new to the field of technical communication. And so, the idea of the Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development (hereafter shortened to "IPD" or "institute") was born. Our initial inspiration was the HRD Institute program offered by the Chicagoland

Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development (CCASTD), to which some of our STC members belong and which was very helpful to us in the initial planning stages. Unlike the HRD Institute, however, we wanted to develop an institute that was affiliated with higher education and that offered courses for college credit as well as continuing education units (CEUs).

After two years of planning and an STC grant to provide seed money, the IPD was ready to pilot two courses: Fundamentals of Technical Communication, for those with either no prior experience or coursework in technical communication, and Topics in Technical Communication, for those with either some prior coursework or experience.

The IPD is now planning its third year of courses, and it has won major STC awards since its inception. Most gratifying, however, has been the praise of the many participants who have enrolled in the IPD courses. Joy Mason, a former president of the Chicago STC, who has taken technical communication courses at several institutions, calls the IPD courses "the best I've ever taken anywhere." Another former participant, Claire Krause, calls the institute "an outstanding educational experience. The unique instructional format and dynamic project requirements allowed students to put their writing and communication abilities to work in a marketable realm. I have never taken a course like this before."

Much work has gone into developing the IPD, and we are eager to share what we have learned with others who may be interested in setting up similar kinds of partnerships. This article briefly explains what the IPD is and how it operates.

WHAT THE IPD IS

Officially, the IPD is an entity of the Chicago chapter STC, and as such, reports directly to the chapter's administrative council and through them, to the STC headquarters. The charter for the IPD was written by the members of the Chicago chapter's Institute Committee and was approved by the Chicago chapter's administrative council in August 1998. The charter sets forth the IPD's mission, structure, operating parameters, relationship with groups and individuals outside of the IPD and STC, and the IPD's governing board and directorship positions. The charter is the key to understanding the institute.

But the charter is not the institute. Rather, the IPD is a living organism—it's the people who are involved in it that give the IPD its identity and reality; without them, there would be no institute. So I suggest that rather than simply read about it, you talk to some of those involved or, better yet, sit in on one of our class sessions next time you're in the Chicago area. In the meantime, however, I'll try to give you some sense of the institute and hope that my enthusiasm and passion for the concept might inspire you to think about how your chapter can develop its own partnership.

Goals and Objectives

Getting back to the charter. . .

The goal of the institute is to provide a unique educational program for both entry- and experienced-level professionals by offering courses in technical communication that integrate academic theory and practical application. The latter—this combination of research-based principles and hands-on practice—lies at the heart of the IPD and is its whole reason for being. When the institute was conceived, its founders were mindful of creating courses that were not already available either through educational institutions or vendors. If another group or school was already offering something similar or could do it better, then, we figured, there was no reason for us or the IPD to do it, too.

With the goal or purpose of the institute thus defined, the charter then lists many objectives for the institute, including the following:

- to provide a series of courses on core concepts and competencies for entry practitioners
- to provide a series of courses on special topics in technical communication for experienced practitioners
- to offer these two courses annually, as logistics permit
- to develop relationships with professionals in industry and academe who can function as instructors or mentors for the IPD
- to maintain communication with the Administrative Council and appropriate subcommittees regarding the Institute's activities and results
- to develop procedures for reviewing and assessing the Institute's operations and achievements
- to develop processes for collaborating with other programs in the Chicago chapter STC, such as the mentoring program.

Affiliations

In support of these goals and objectives, the institute may form relationships with individuals, academic institutions, consulting firms, and professional

associations or organizations. From the onset, the IPD was designed as a collaborative effort of teachers, researchers, and practicing professionals in the field of technical communication (and many of the individuals have filled all three roles in their careers). In fact, it was just such a mix of individuals who, while serving on the Chicago STC's education committee, came up with the idea of the institute in the first place. And, today, now five years later, the IPD carries on this tradition of collaboration at all levels—whether it is in the makeup of the board that governs the institute; the instructors who design, plan, and team teach the courses; or the course participants themselves, as they develop teamwork skills by working jointly on course projects and in-class exercises.

Practitioners. Chicago has one of the largest STC chapters in the country and accordingly its members represent a wide range of businesses and organizations, big and small. The IPD invites those with the most experience or expertise to become instructors, mentors, panelists, or brown-bag speakers in its courses.

Underlying the institute is the belief that there is no substitute for first-hand knowledge. In the classroom, the practitioners bring the voice of experience to bear upon what might otherwise seem abstract theories, principles, and strategies. The practitioners can quickly draw upon a wealth of examples, stories, and case studies—all of which help make the class more interesting and at the same time establish the instructors' credibility.

For example, the IPD's recent course began with a session that included six panelists with what I figured was a total of more than 100 years of experience among them. On a sunny Saturday, after being in class for four hours already, the participants sat in rapt attention listening to our guest panelists give their perspectives on that day's topic: the role of a technical communicator within an organization and within a product's lifecycle (subtitled "how to gain respect and influence action as a technical communicator"). The forum was engaging, entertaining, and jam-packed with sage advice and many questions from the participants. It reminded me of how (in my romantic notions anyway) people in a tribal community learn and pass on knowledge—sitting around in a circle at the feet of their tribal elders. And more than once during the lively exchanges, I wished I had thought of bringing a camcorder to videotape the session and preserve it for others who couldn't be in the course. But then, I realized (and rationalized), that may have ruined the spontaneity and dynamism of the event. It wouldn't have been the same. Watching a video never is.

It's at moments like these that those of us involved in the institute feel our spirits soar, for we know we're watching something very special unfold. The greatest compliments, though, always come from the course participants themselves. One of them expressed what I

still think is the highest compliment of all: “Jeez, I forgot I was a student and that this was a classroom!”

Academicians. The IPD also encourages the involvement of those who teach, study, and research technical communication in colleges and universities. Thus far, individuals from DePaul University, Illinois Institute of Technology, Purdue (Calumet) University, Illinois State University, and Northern Illinois University have served as instructors in the IPD courses. And the institute board is trying to widen its reach even further by including area colleges and, perhaps one day, forming a consortium among several schools.

In the practice/theory binary, if you think of the professional technical communicators upholding the practice end, then it’s the academicians—the professors, researchers, and scholars—who hold up the theory end. They are ones whose job it is to study technical communication, to be familiar with the research, and to conduct the research themselves. To find out not only what works and how it works (what the practitioners know best) but also why and in what situations it works. And even to critically examine what we mean by “works”—including the very values underlying our actions and words, as well as their social and political implications.

But lest I start spouting hermeneutics, paralogic rhetoric, and a lot of other “ic’s” that make practitioners want to stay far afield from any professor, let me emphasize once again that the main goal of the institute is to break down the practice/theory binary, and to remove the walls that separate the classroom and the workplace. To help effect that goal, the IPD screens its instructors carefully for those who understand the importance of informed practice on the one hand, and grounded theory on the other.

Thus, contrary to the old adage, “Those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach,” all of the professors who teach for the institute also have “real-world” experience, many of them as independent consultants. Others are former professors who have left academe to become full-time, corporate employees. (For many reasons I cannot go into here, few leave the corporate world to go into academe full time.)

These, then, are the two main groups affiliated with the IPD. However, in terms of the mechanics of the IPD and its operations, there is another important player in this venture, and one to which we will now turn briefly.

Partnership with Northern Illinois University

Since its beginning, the IPD has partnered with Northern Illinois University (NIU). The reasons are many: some pragmatic, some economic, some ideological, and some personal, not the least of which is

fact that I am a professor at NIU and I also served on the original Chicago STC Education Committee out of which the institute idea was conceived, on the subsequent Institute Committee that gave it flesh, and now as the managing director of the Institute Governing Board. In other words, I had and continue to have a vested interest in this baby since I was one of its midwives (or is it “midpersons” nowadays?).

Pragmatics. Moreover, though, NIU gave the IPD courses an institutional home by providing me with some released time to serve as the institute’s course coordinator and by handling such practical matters as course listings, registrations and records, credit, and course location. NIU’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Department of English, and the Office of External Programming have been exceptionally supportive of the partnership with the Chicago chapter STC.

Technically speaking, the Chicago STC IPD courses are really NIU courses since they are offered through the university and appear in the course schedule. Unlike other university courses, the institute-affiliated courses are offered for either undergraduate or graduate credit, or continuing education units (CEUs). Furthermore, the courses can be taken for a grade or pass/fail, or may be audited.

This flexibility in credit and grade options makes the NIU/Chicago STC IPD courses attractive to a wide audience, including regular university students seeking degrees, non-traditional students fulfilling professional growth requirements for their jobs, and those who are both seeking a degree and working full time.

To ensure that this is a true partnership and to prevent the courses from quickly filling up with current NIU students, one-half of the seats in the NIU/STC courses are reserved for current or prospective Chicago STC members. While this creates something of a nightmare in registrations because it adds another variable that the IPD and NIU need to track, we anticipate that computers will make this task easier in the near future.

Economics. Another reason for the appeal of the university partnership is sheer economics. Compared with the cost of vendor courses or with the tuition at private universities in the area, NIU’s tuition is quite reasonable—anywhere from a half to a third of the cost.

Also, the university has available classrooms at a number of locations, and many of these rooms are now equipped with high-tech computer/projection systems, which would be expensive to rent were the institute not affiliated with the university.

Finally, NIU pays an honorarium to all of the instructors and mentors associated with the institute courses. The honoraria are insignificant when compared with the consulting fees that these professionals normally

command, but nonetheless in total it still amounts to several thousands of dollars per year, which the Chicago chapter STC does not have to pay.

On the Chicago STC side of the ledger are some marketing, printing, and postage costs. However, we expect these costs will decline as the institute moves most of its publicity and orientation materials to the NIU and the Chicago chapter STC web sites.

Educational Ideology. It's important to keep in mind, however, that the driving force behind this partnership is neither pragmatics nor economics. The institute does not exist because it's easy or cheap to run. Planning an NIU/STC course is more time-consuming and difficult than any other course with which I've been involved. And I can assure you that no one, including the university and the Chicago STC, is in this for money. Rather, it is commitment to an educational ideal that has fueled this effort.

Whatever the opposite of distance education is—call it face-to-face education—is what the institute is all about. Better yet, call it interface education (in-your-face education?): that meeting place of mind and body, thinking and doing, theory and practice—all so seamlessly interwoven that you can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

When a course meets for seven Saturdays, 9 am to 4 pm, and you have to literally drag the course participants out of the room because it's way past 4:00 and you have to lock up, you know something good is happening. You know, as the students would say, you're smokin'.

If this is beginning to sound a bit like proselytizing, so be it, but the kind of partnership I'm describing has to begin with passion and conviction, not money or a template, otherwise it can't succeed.

HOW IT OPERATES

Assuming you have the passion and can find enough other people who share your dream, you're ready to start thinking nuts and bolts. Here is where the wheels can fall off. As I mentioned, the IPD was two years in the planning. Had we known ahead of time how long it would take, how hard we would have to work, or how many committees, meetings, calls, and emails it would entail, we might have folded our tent long ago. As I frequently tell my students, the best thing they have going for them is their naiveté, and so it was with us. Knowing too much can immobilize you and prevent you from venturing into the unknown. Still and all, seeing what others have done can help you save time and prevent you from making the same mistakes. Since I've already described how the partnership functions, I'd like to turn now to the courses themselves.

General Course Structure

As mentioned previously, for the past two years, the IPD has offered two courses: Fundamentals of Technical Communication (FTC) in the spring and Topics in Technical Communication (TTC) in the fall. Each course is offered for seven Saturdays, from 9 to 4, in a suburb of Chicago; each involves a team of instructors, some from academe and some from business and industry; each has a maximum enrollment of 25 participants; and each carries either 3 semester-hour credits (at the undergraduate or graduate level) or 4 CEUs, with about 40 to 50 total contact hours per course. These hours include individual conferences before and after class, and some brown-bag lunch sessions on topics requested by the course participants and hosted by other technical communicators and STC members who want to become involved in the institute but with a minimal time commitment at this point.

Neither course is a "tools" course because those types of workshops (e.g., RoboHelp, PageMaker, and Dreamweaver) are readily available in the Chicago area, and, besides, are outside the institute's purview. Thus, the course does not meet in a computer lab, but in a "smart classroom," with an instructor podium well equipped with a computer, projection system, TVs, VCRs, and a direct connection to the Internet. Most instructors plug their laptops into the podium and use those to project their materials.

Typically, however, the class sessions do not involve straight lecture, but rather a combination of lecture, discussion, and application exercises. In our orientation sessions with the instructional team and in our instructor guide, we stress the importance of student participation and interaction. The layout of the classroom facilitates this with individual desks that can be easily moved in and out of small groups. Also, the building in which the class is held has several other rooms and lounges that we use for small-group activities during the day.

For both courses, the institute board prepares orientation materials and holds orientation sessions for the instructors. In the FTC course, there are also orientation materials and sessions for the mentors. In both courses, too, the institute board works with the instructors to develop a course pack of customized materials for the course. Because this is an STC-affiliated course, we rely heavily upon articles from *Technical Communication* and *Intercom*. In each course, usually one or two textbooks are also required or recommended reading.

Since there is not time here to describe both courses in detail, I will spend more time on the first one and only gloss over the main features of the second one.

Fundamentals Course

This course begins in mid-March, when the official spring semester at NIU is half over, but by then so is most of the snow, as the daylight grows longer each day and the weather sunnier. By deliberately avoiding the worst weeks of Midwest winters, we help ensure that course participants are in a better frame of mind when they arrive to class. In fact, we help ensure that they arrive, period, because they don't have to drive in blizzard and the class isn't cancelled because of a snowstorm. As a sidenote, convincing the university that the rest of the world is not on the academic calendar and does not operate by semesters may take some rhetorical prowess, but universities are becoming more aware of their "client's" needs as state schools in particular are being held more accountable for the quality of the education they provide their taxpayers. NIU has become especially attuned to its regional mission in the Chicagoland area, and the NIU/STC partnership is one very tangible way that we can say we are reaching out to the business community in northern Illinois.

Although the IPD skips the first half of the semester, by meeting every Saturday (except Easter weekend) for seven Saturdays, we still put in the same number of hours as the regular-semester NIU courses.

Preliminary Contacts & Course Requirements.

FTC is an introductory course designed for those new to the profession. As the course professor/coordinator, I correspond with all of the enrollees about a month before the course begins to explain the main requirement and to give them guidelines for finding a real-world client project to work on throughout the course, for conducting a client interview, and for writing a project proposal.

The types of projects span the spectrum of technical writing: from brochures and newsletters, to manuals, online documentation, and web sites. Clients include present employers, clubs, churches, small companies, large corporations—virtually anyone who has a genuine need to have something written. Projects developed for non-profit organizations are especially encouraged because they carry low risks but high rewards—namely, the satisfaction of having volunteered one's services for a worthy cause. None of the participants are paid for the work they do in conjunction with their course projects.

By the first session, each participant has submitted a project proposal and participant survey to me, and directors of our institute board use these to match each course participant with one of the four mentors whom we have arranged to have work with them over the next seven weeks on both their client project and their professional development goals and plans. In addition to working with a mentor, each participant consults with me at various stages of the client project.

Another way in which the mentors and I stay in tune with the participants is through their electronic journals. Soon after each session, each participant sends me (and if they wish, also their mentor) reflections about the class and the preparatory readings. In these journal entries, which are intended to be spontaneous and candid, the participants relate the specific day's topic to their client projects and career goals. Each is encouraged to develop a personal inventory of the skills they think they need to develop to prepare themselves as technical communicators, as well as a plan for their own professional growth. These e-journals often become the springboard for topics of discussion during individual conferences with the instructors, mentors, or me; during panel presentations in class or brown-bag lunch sessions; or during breaks and over lunch as participants chat amongst themselves. The bonding that occurs throughout the seven weeks is extraordinary, to the extent that many participants continue to see each other (and even have hired or contracted each other) and many have even asked the IPD to hold reunions, the first of which will be this spring.

Finally, for those enrolled for graduate credit, another requirement is a research-related project, which may be related to the main client project or may involve inquiry into another topic of importance to them and to the field of technical communication. Some have conducted primary research (interviews or surveys) and others have done traditional, secondary research. We always encourage the participants to make their "deliverable" something of use to someone else (e.g., a report, feasibility study, or proposal for a company or organization; a book review or article for a journal), instead of the usual research paper that simply gets filed or tossed out once it has been turned in. For the IPD is based upon the theory that writing is not an end product but an integral part of a process involving human interaction and that, accordingly, writing shapes, as well as reflects, our beliefs, behavior, and institutions.

Course Topics & Evaluations. The FTC topics include an introduction to the profession and discipline of technical communication; basic skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success; testing usability; document design for paper; document design for electronic media; and technical editing. Instructors of these sessions, who also receive advance copies of the participants' project proposals, are encouraged to make connections between their topics and the participants' client projects. On the last day of the course, the participants give short oral presentations describing their projects, share what they learned from doing them, and suggest what they might do differently were they to do their projects now knowing what they didn't know before.

As NIU's instructor of record and as the course coordinator, I evaluate each project and am responsible

for submitting the final grades. In my assessment, however, I consult with the mentors and enlist their input.

As for evaluating each session and instructor, participants complete an evaluation form at the end of each session, copies of which are given to the respective instructor, as well as to the institute board (and, thus, the Chicago STC) and NIU. At the end of the course, participants also evaluate the course as a whole and their mentors. And, finally, mentors and instructors evaluate their role in the course and offer suggestions for improvement. The institute board reviews all of these evaluations in its course planning for the following year.

Topics in Technical Communication

The second course, offered each year in the fall is Topics in Technical Communication, which is geared toward those with either some prior course work in technical communication or some prior experience (1-3 years). TTC has been structured in much the same way as FTC, but the topics and instructors are different, there are no mentors involved in the course, and there is less continuity of topics from session to session. Also, instead of one main client project as in the FTC course, the participants work on three separate assignments, each an application exercise related to one of the course topics.

Because this course spans the entire fall semester, the seven class sessions are held approximately every other Saturday, thereby allowing time for the participants to complete each assignment before beginning the next one. The instructors are responsible for evaluating the participants' assignments and assigning grades, although because I am also the instructor of record for this course, I too review all of the assignments and submit the final grades to the university. Finally, this course, like FTC, also includes e-journals and the extra research project for those enrolled for graduate credit.

For the past two years, this course has included the following topics: design, documentation, and the product life cycle; needs analysis; project management; online documentation; web design from the user perspective; interviewing subject matter experts; and improving your writing style. Some topics spanned one and a half Saturdays, with the same instructor returning to review the submitted homework during the morning session of the following class; and other topics that didn't have associated homework were covered in half-day sessions.

This year, in an attempt to meet the ongoing needs of former institute participants and more experienced professionals, the IPD is offering all new topics and in a new modular format. For this fall we have scheduled four mini-courses, each running for only two Saturdays, and each carrying one semester-hour credit. Thus, it

will now be possible to take one, two, three, or all four of the modules and receive anywhere from one to four credits of undergraduate or graduate credit. The institute piloted a mini-course this past fall and it was well received. The result was therefore a change of format in the TTC course to permit even greater flexibility of scheduling and variety of topics. The institute continually tries to practice what it preaches in the courses: that the first principle of good communication is to meet the audience's needs.

As I hope is evident from this description, the partnership between the Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development and Northern Illinois University is meeting an educational need that has long been recognized by both academicians and practitioners of technical communication: the need to integrate theory and practice. We hope other STC chapters will join the dialogue about how to forge alliances with those in academe. The Chicago STC/NIU partnership may not be the model that suits your chapter or your location, but then models are not meant to be replicated in every detail. On behalf of the IPD board, I wish you the best of luck as you develop your own educational programs and I invite you to share your experiences with us and other STC members.

Christine Abbott, Ph.D.

Managing Director, Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development
Associate Professor of English
Northern Illinois University
Department of English
DeKalb, Illinois 60115-2863
(815) 753-6606
cbabbott@aol.com

Christine Abbott is a senior member of STC and an associate professor of English in rhetoric and technical writing at Northern Illinois University, where she also serves as internship coordinator and faculty advisor for the student chapter STC. Before coming to NIU, she was a principal partner of Barabas, Ryba & Associates, Ltd., one of the first consulting firms in business and technical communication in the Chicago area, with several major corporations as clients. Her publications include *Technical Writing in a Corporate Culture: A Study of the Nature of Information*. Her latest research focuses on the use of self-protective rhetoric in organizational writing—or what practitioners commonly refer to as the CYA (“cover-your-ass”) phenomenon.

The members of the Orientation Committee that planned the IPD were Anna Miller, Mary Ryba Knepper, Gina Meyers, Alex Kantis, and Christine Abbott. The members of the current Institute Governing Board are Cathy Kolecki, Liz Valdes, Gary Gilpin, Carolyn Boiarsky, and Christine Abbott.