

Teaching Teachers at the Institute in Technical Communication: A Special Report on Our Pilot Project

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In STC's first special opportunity grant, seven STC-funded high school teachers attended the Institute in Technical Communication, held at Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi in June, 1999. Originally developed for teachers at two-year colleges, the 19th Institute became a small experiment, combining high school teachers and 13 other teachers from community and technical colleges.

Most of the way through the following school year, the STC-funded teachers have implemented some lessons from the Institute, and STC has included funding for teachers to attend the Institute part of the budget of its Practical Communication Committee.

EVALUATING THE INSTITUTE IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION: OUTCOMES

As the manager of the Practical Communication Committee and the STC observer at the 19th annual Institute in Technical Communication, I expect that all of the teachers whom STC funded to attend will change the way they teach language arts to their students. They've said so themselves. I expect that some of "our" teachers will spark changes in the way all subjects are taught in their schools and in their districts because of their time at ITC. Each of these teachers teaches 100 to 280 students a year. Even if they can affect a small percentage of those students by giving them solid rhetorical habits this coming school year, STC has begun to make a big difference.

STC funded seven teachers to attend, but 13 more heard about us. Faculty from respected institutions also met our teachers and learned about how STC is reaching into secondary education. Many more teachers wanted to apply but couldn't this year. Some have written since our recruiting effort: Will you do it again? Will you invite me? What did you learn this time?

The word is out.

Here are a few things that Mitzi, Anthony, Therese, Kathy, Hilda, Mellonee, and Donna have said about ITC:

ITC '99 was an incredible experience. ...My own experience was that all the forces present during that week renewed my creative energies, spurred the work begun there beyond the time I allocated it, and accomplished all the goals I set in my application to STC to attend. Thank you, STC, for initiating this program for high school teachers and for selecting me to attend ITC!

Such presentations as Anderson's Establishing Course Goals and Staples' Evaluating Assignments: Purpose, Audience, Goals were especially helpful in meeting my first objective for attending ITC, which had to do with the practical concerns of actual assignments and assessment. Many of the other presentations and my out-of-class discussions with the faculty and other teachers gave me additional information about assessment and scoring in the classroom. I have heard and read much of the conventional theoretical wisdom in these areas; I decided to seek out the experienced opinions of more practical educators, and I did. I gained some methods I will test in the coming school year.

I came away with many classroom activities, discussion topics, and major projects I intend to incorporate into my technical writing course this year. In addition, I learned how I might rethink my curriculum in several classes to incorporate more 'hands-on' and practical assignments.

One of the strengths of the ITC is the quality of people involved. The directors and instructors of the Institute were all of the highest quality. They not only had excellent command of their subject material, they were able to deliver the information in a manner that facilitated learning. The material proved useful and relevant. What I enjoyed was developing ideas to use in my teaching situation. The margins of my notes are all filled with specific applications of the material to my subject.

I particularly enjoyed the approachability of the instructors. They were all willing to share ideas specific to what would benefit my discipline. I believe the networking opportunities among the participants and faculty will also hold a high value. I try to instill this idea in my students: "together, we all go farther."

The English, drama, speech, and music students of these teachers are in for a significant, rich, and rewarding educational experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Let's do it again. The quotes above are just a sample of the type of remarks that the teachers included in their written reflections on the ITC. They're going to apply what they learned right away. (One teacher is in a year-around school and is using assignments with his ninth graders already.) The teachers obviously got a lot out of the Institute. The curriculum as broad and deep in both theory and application. (For more about curriculum, below.) This is a worthwhile program for STC to continue to involve itself with, with money and time.

Continue with the remainder of the pilot project. Follow-up will prove the true usefulness of the curriculum at the ITC. The teachers who attended the ITC in 1999 with STC funding have all agreed to stay in touch with the committee and they expect to be surveyed during the school year to report on what they do and don't implement from ITC. They'll also take part in a teacher-technical communicator listserv where they'll be able to consult each other, get ideas, and ask questions. We'll monitor that activity to see what we can learn about more resources STC can provide teachers.

Start distributing information about the program and recruiting teachers earlier. The Practical Communication Committee has included funding for sending teachers in our 1999-2000 budget. By having funding approved in September, we are assured of recruiting more than enough teachers to attend ITC in June, 2000. This also gives us more time to work with STC regions to secure additional funding for teachers who need help with travel expenses.

The committee continues to research other programs. If we find other programs that we think STC should involve itself with, we recommend sending 1-3 people to each. Having gone through the process once, and by starting the process again soon, we'll have made connections and found outlets for information about recruiting for the programs we're interested in. We know better now where to put the announcements. Timing and the amount of time the announcements are available seem to influence the number of applications we receive.

Rely on a committee member to attend the institute to observe the program. The formality of the planned focus group just didn't work. There were many opportunities to talk with teachers one-on-one, however, and using this type of interview I could glean a lot of information in an unobtrusive way. For more

about what we learned at the focus group and in informal interviews with teachers at the ITC, see the committee website at www2.stc.org/pics/pcc/pcmain.htm#what_teachers_told_us.html.

Use evaluation methods already in place at the Institute. Co-directors Ann Laster and Penny Sansbury have developed an evaluation questionnaire that they use at the end of each Institute to improve the quality of the program every year. Rather than developing our own evaluation questionnaire exiting the institute, we should ask Penny to key the forms for high school or two-year college teachers, and use the ITC's data to help assess STC's next steps.

THE INSTITUTE

Originally developed for teachers at two-year colleges by TYCA-SE (Two Year College English Association – Southeast, an association of the National Council of Teachers of English), most of the attendees are indeed teachers at community colleges or technical colleges. This year 13 people who attended were two-year college teachers. The rest were high school teachers funded by STC. One community college teacher attended ITC for the second time.

Although the curriculum is geared toward teachers at two-year colleges and their students, most of the community college teachers agreed that the level of proficiency is similar between the average high school student and the average community college student. A good many of community college students dropped out of high school, or having found themselves in the world of work realize they need more education – and have found the motivation after being out on their own for a while.

The faculty were all aware that there would be a large contingent of high school teachers present and directed their lessons to all in the audience, giving specific examples for teachers from middle school to high school to community college, and finally, to four-year university.

For more information about the Institute, you can read the background information in the original proposal. It's available online at www2.stc.org/pics/pcmain.htm#ITC_proposal.html.

Faculty

The Institute faculty and curriculum vary from year to year, which means that each Institute offers participants a new view of technical communication practice, pedagogy, and applied research. The directors consistently select well known faculty members, who donate their services. Past faculty members have

included Donald Cunningham, Thomas Pearsall, and Stephen Bernhardt. This people on this year's faculty were:

Paul Anderson
Technical and Scientific
Communication
Programs
Miami University
(Ohio)
STC Fellow

Rebecca Burnett
Department of English
Iowa State University
STC Senior Member

Katherine Staples
Technical
Communications
Program
Austin Community
College
STC Fellow

Rich Raymond
Department of Rhetoric
and Writing
University of Arkansas -
Little Rock
STC Member

Ron Blicq
RGI International
STC Fellow

Ann Laster, ITC
Director
English Department,
Emerita
Hinds Community
College

Penny Stockman
Sansbury, ITC Director
English Department
Florence-Darlington
Technical College

Curriculum for 1999

The first days' sessions covered rhetorical theory, a much-needed background for all the attendees (and a good refresher for this communicator). But by the end of the day on Tuesday, application came to the fore. Here's a sample of some topics covered at the ITC:

- Isn't writing just writing? Differences between teaching composition and TC
- Who are we? TC as discipline and profession
- Teaching business and communication majors
- Teaching the service course in TC
- Establishing course goals
- Ethics in TC: Knowing and choosing
- Developing your community advisory committee: allies and supporters for instruction
- Discussion groups: A, Using E-mail as a teaching tool in TC or B, Literature in the TC course
- Prewriting and other tomfoolery: The pedagogy of laughter
- Introducing technical description
- Analyzing and adapting to different audiences / From AARP to the Nursery
- Evaluating assignments: purpose, audience, goals
- Page design
- Visual displays

- Applying page design and visual displays
- WWW.com: The Web and the TC course
- Case studies
- Using workplace examples in the classroom
- Swap shop: participants and faculty share their favorite handouts and assignments
- Integrating oral reporting into the TC classroom
- Collaboration and teamwork

In general, the feedback from the teachers was that the curriculum was what they needed. Helping them find the difference between technical writing and the other types of writing they teach, rather than telling them, was very effective.

Comments on the Curriculum

Many of the sessions were run in this inductive way: present materials or ideas and have the teachers examine them, analyze them, and draw conclusions. The teachers found this stimulating and many of them talked about implementing this method in their classrooms.

Rhetorical methods were covered thoroughly in sessions such as *Teaching Business and Communication Majors*, *Analyzing and Adapting to Different Audiences*, *Page Design*, *Visual Displays*, *Applying Page Design and Visual Displays*, and *Using Workplace Examples in the Classroom*. Unfortunately, there were a few sessions that advocated formulaic approaches to communication. While using formulas to write reports or to approach case studies may be more straightforward to teach than rhetorical methods are, formulas may prove more difficult for students to invent communication when they face situations that the formulas don't fit.

It would be nice to see more on information design for the Web, team and cross-curriculum teaching, how to get help teaching media you don't know, and there's never enough to say about audience analysis. "Testing" instructions might also be useful to students and could aid teachers in assessment.

A few of the teachers arrived at the Institute concerned about grading. After all, if there isn't any "right way" to do information design, how do you score it? Two sessions in particular — *Evaluating Assignments: Purpose, Audience, Goals*, and *Establishing Goals* — addressed this area, and the teachers I've talked to since expressed a greater comfort level with assessing technical communication assignments.

Atmosphere

What makes the Institute work so well – in addition to a fine faculty, a satisfactory curriculum, southern

hospitality, good food, and a perfect facility – is the atmosphere of learning, respect, and community that Institute directors Ann Laster and Penny Sansbury create during the week. There is obvious rapport and respect among the faculty, and they're nearly evangelistic about teaching what they know. The energy, enthusiasm, and personal warmth of everyone involved are contagious. The faculty all work to help individuals get what they need out of the sessions, but they also socialize freely to learn about each person attending. By the end of the week, we had all become friends. We all feel free to call on one another for information and advice. And I think the relationships will last a long, long time.

Many of the teachers said in different ways that it was the best summer camp experience of their lives. A few were misty-eyed on Friday afternoon, but all were inspired to teach and to learn about technical communication.

EVALUATING THE PILOT PROJECT

Recruiting Teachers

Although we had a short time to recruit teachers, we were successful at getting the word out and recruiting excellent candidates.

The methods we used worked well enough between March and the end of May, 1999 (interrupted by staggered spring breaks in April), to bring us eight excellent teachers of varied experience teaching, teaching tech comm, and in non-academic workplaces. Our goal was to send 10 teachers. Seven teachers actually attended ITC with funds from STC. By starting earlier in 2000 and recruiting at a different time in the school year, we should be successful at recruiting more than enough candidates.

I learned at the ITC that a connection with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is very important for the committee to develop and for STC to nurture. A high percentage of high school English teachers are members of NCTE, and are avid readers of NCTE journals and users of NCTE tools. The teachers also attend state and national NCTE conferences.

One important consideration is the cost of airfare for teachers. One of the eight teachers we selected could not attend because the cost of travel was too high. A fare of over \$500 combined with the likelihood that the teachers in her district would go out on strike meant

that she felt it was inappropriate to ask her principal for the money and she couldn't afford to pay for it herself. The nearest STC chapter to her is a student chapter. We emailed the sponsor of the chapter hoping for some assistance, but received no response. We ran out of time.

For ITC 2000, we would like to work with director-sponsors to have regions or chapters make matching grants to teachers specifically for travel to the ITC.

Selecting Teachers

The committee shaped an excellent application form and decided on selection criteria. They are available from the committee by writing to stc_prac_comm@hotmail.com.

Because we received only eight applications in 1999, and because those were so good, making selections was the easiest part of the project. As a pilot however, we did get to test both the application form and the selection criteria, and found them to be solid. We'll make a few small changes to the application form, but the selection criteria will stay intact.

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Many people contributed the experiences and information in this session. I especially want to thank Mitzi Harris, Therese Laux, Anthony Pastizzo, and Katherine Staples for their willingness to share with all of us their adventures, foibles, and lessons learned teaching technical communication.