

Reaching Out—How an STC Chapter Can Support Education in its Community and Professional Development for its Membership

Dan Voss and Gail Lippincott

A chapter-level education committee can provide a valuable resource both to STC chapter members and to local educational institutions. In this paper, which accompanies a progression on the same subject, the Orlando Chapter's Education Committee describes six initiatives it has pursued to advance education and professional development within its sphere of influence: (1) developing procedures and avenues of communication to govern its own operations, (2) instituting and administering a scholarship program, (3) conducting a high school writing competition, (4) providing instructional support for secondary education in the community, (5) instituting mentoring programs, and (6) supporting and enhancing professional development.

"Only the educated are free." —Epictetus

"Education, fundamentally, is the increase of the percentage of the conscious in relation to the unconscious." —Edith Hamilton

"Education strays from reality when it divides its knowledge into separate compartments without due regard to the connection between them." —Frances Wosmek

"The main part of intellectual education is not the acquisition of facts but learning how to make the facts live." —Oliver Wendell Holmes

"Education costs money, but then so does ignorance." —Sir Claus Moser

These are but a handful of the quotations that are readily available on education.

The Holmes quote, perhaps, strikes closest to home when it comes to education and technical communication—stressing, as it does, the living texts of our profession. As Wosmek points out, connecting what we *know* with what we *do* forges the link between theory and practice, between information and knowledge.

But sheer economics count as well; witness the Moser quote, oft paraphrased to **"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."**

Given the importance of both academic preparation and ongoing professional development to technical communication as a career and a profession, it behooves the Society for Technical Communication to give the subject the attention it deserves. The STC Board, keenly

aware of this imperative, supports education as one of the four overarching goals in the Society's 1999-2004 Strategic Plan:

#3: Improve educational opportunities for technical communicators.¹

Under that goal, Objective #3.2 focuses specifically on educational outreach:

#3.2 Support secondary and college-level education in technical communication.²

Sub-objectives include evaluating and developing curriculum and materials, sponsoring in-service training and seminars for teaching technical communication in secondary schools, and collecting and publicizing model curricula for technical communication degree programs.³

Moreover, the strategic commitment has been translated into action through such initiatives as research grants and scholarships,⁴ numerous avenues for professional development,⁵ and increasing focus on assisting secondary school educators, such as the Practical Communication Committee's sponsorship of ten high school instructors to attend the 19th Annual Institute in Technical Communication at Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi.⁶

In addition, much has been accomplished at the chapter level, including a wide range of initiatives such as valuable and innovative support to secondary education through curriculum development at the South Carolina⁷ and Manitoba chapters;^{8,9} an educational outreach mentoring and internship program at the Sacramento and other Region 8 chapters;¹⁰ and highly successful writing competitions such as the Austin T. Brown contest¹¹ sponsored by the Washington, D.C., chapter, and several other chapters.

Education and professional development offer an organizing focus to the Orlando Chapter, whose Education Committee has actively supported initiatives in the local educational community since 1994. Formed initially to develop formal procedures for awarding undergraduate scholarships, the committee accomplished its objective and then moved on to broader initiatives. The result has been a very productive 6 years.

This paper summarizes the committee's initiatives in six areas: (1) developing procedures and avenues of communication to govern its own operations, (2) instituting and administering a scholarship program, (3) conducting a high school writing competition, (4)

providing instructional support for secondary education in the community, (5) instituting mentoring programs, and (6) supporting and enhancing professional development.

Our intent is to offer a helpful point of departure for other chapters that would like to increase their support to education.

DEVELOPING PROCEDURES AND AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION

“Here at the Orlando Chapter Education Committee, all eight members do solemnly affirm that our educational initiatives occupy uncontested top priority at all times in both our professional and our personal lives, relegating all other imperatives—from document deadlines to Midget Soccer championships—to secondary status.”

If you believe that, we have some property southeast of Kissimmee you might be interested in. Conference program tours are available upon request—bring your own airboat.

Seriously, one of the major challenges faced by any professional association committee is how to mobilize limited resources, and, especially, precious *time*, to get things done. The answer is twofold: (1) establish realistic goals and (2) pursue them with efficiency, professionalism, and teamwork.

In pursuit thereof, the Orlando Chapter Education Committee has, over the past 6 years, evolved a charter and operating procedures designed to ensure efficient operation.¹² We begin each chapter year with specific goals and objectives¹³ and end the year with a final report detailing our accomplishments against those objectives.¹⁴ Hopefully, there is some correlation!

Rather than rehash what is available at our Web site, let us offer a few tips on optimizing time use that we have found helpful:

- **Run efficient meetings.** Keep them short, have an agenda, and locate and schedule them so as to maximize attendance.
- **Exploit e-mail and Web-based discussion groups.** Strategic use of e-mail and online forums can halve the number of physical meetings and double productivity. There’s just one caveat: *everyone* has to access these resources and *use them*—regularly!
- **Divide and conquer.** Tasks that would choke any one person can readily be swallowed by a committee if (1) the tasks are divided into bite-sized pieces and

(2) everybody pitches in (e.g., a high school writing competition; see below).

An area of operation that merits specific mention is publicity. Without it, much of what we accomplish would go unnoticed except for those individuals who are immediately affected. Granted, these individuals are generally the most important (e.g., the scholarship recipient receiving funding, the high school instructor receiving training), but these achievements can be *leveraged* through judicious public relations.

Our committee’s efforts on publicity encompass four major areas: (1) local newspapers; (2) college newspapers; (3) STC internal media (e.g., *Tech Trends*, our chapter newsletter; *Intercom*; *Tieline*); and (4) our Web site.

INSTITUTING A SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Orlando Chapter’s scholarship program began at the undergraduate level, geared primarily toward the technical communication degree program at the nearby University of Central Florida (UCF). In 1994, the Education Committee systematized the procedure by instituting a formal application process, defining selection criteria, and evaluating applications to select recipients.

The application consists of a simple form, accompanied by a certified transcript and a short (one-page) but important essay.

The selection criteria, in approximate order of importance, include vision and understanding of technical communication as a profession, as well as the ability to express that vision in writing, as measured in the essay; academic performance, as reflected in the GPA and transcript; and financial need or other special considerations. Ultimately, selection is a holistic process involving both mathematical tabulation of committee members’ individual rankings plus subjective discussion of each application on its own merit. We’ve had some late meetings, but we’ve always reached consensus.

In 1995, the committee extended its reach, expanding the scholarship program to include awards to graduate students at UCF and initiating Excellence awards for outstanding performance in technical communication at area community colleges. The graduate student scholarships follow the same selection process as the awards to undergraduates; the Excellence awards, which are smaller financially, are based solely on the recommendation of community college faculty.

Sustaining such an ambitious financial commitment calls for long-term strategic planning to overcome a chapter’s continual turnover in leadership. At the Region 3 *Trends*

conference in October 1997, the hosting Orlando Chapter dedicated the scholarship fund¹⁵ to honor the memory of an esteemed colleague, Melissa Pellegrin, who died the previous spring. A member of the Education Committee and a 1994 graduate of UCF, Melissa was herself a recipient of an Orlando Chapter undergraduate scholarship. She is sorely missed.

Through the generosity of Melissa's friends, family, and coworkers, coupled with equally generous grants from the STC Board, the Melissa Pellegrin Memorial Scholarship Fund¹⁶ is already well established as a self-sustaining endowment that will preserve her memory and promote the higher education of Central Florida technical communicators, in perpetuity.¹⁷

In 1996, the Education Committee decided that rather than further extend the formal scholarship program to the secondary school level, it would be more beneficial to sponsor a high school writing competition (see next section). This venue would not only provide financial awards but also better serve to expand awareness of technical communication both as a distinct and important discipline and as an attractive career option.

CONDUCTING A HIGH SCHOOL WRITING COMPETITION

What are the keys to sponsoring a successful high school technical writing competition? From an Education Committee standpoint, there are two paths to success: (1) turn loose a human dynamo who will single-handedly plow through all obstacles and through sheer energy *make* things happen (our committee was so fortunate as to actually have had such an individual, in the person of one Marty Goodwin, to get our competition off and running in 1995-96); or (2) divide and conquer, which has enabled us to continue to build the competition since the departure of its originator (we are happy to report that he has since returned!).

From a strategy standpoint, the key to success is to educate the target audience. Most high school instructors, let alone students, don't even know what technical communication *is*—much less how to bring it into their classrooms. Face it—we're technical communicators and *we're* still defining our profession! However, once instructors, especially English and science teachers, see the high correlation between the principles of technical communication and the basics of classroom instruction in practical writing, they are quick to realize its potential.

The most effective path to the teachers is neither from the top (county-level curriculum coordinators) nor from the

bottom (individual classroom instructors), but from the middle—viz., the English and Science Department chairs at individual schools. (Note, however, that protocol may demand you get approval at the county level before taking your message to the individual schools.)

Once the school-level points of contact are established (increasingly, counties and schools are posting Web sites that facilitate the research process), initial overtures can be made through letters and/or e-mail messages of introduction; follow-up involves telephone contact and, ultimately, “pressing the flesh.” Classroom visits should generally be reserved for classes that are already working on a technical communication project, or at least studying the subject; otherwise, the results (see “ROI,” next section) are apt to be marginal. Another useful promotional strategy is to “piggyback” on local science fairs, which will generally already have a much higher profile than a fledgling technical writing competition.

Concerning the administration of the contest, a wealth of materials exists both at the chapter level¹⁸ and the international level¹⁹ to serve as a template for contest guidelines, evaluation criteria, judging, awards and recognition, and the like. No need to reinvent the wheel.

As far as budget is concerned, STC urges local chapters not to charge registration fees, which certainly is a boon in drawing entries. In addition, reasonably attractive financial awards are an obvious advantage in drawing entries. How, then, do we cover the costs of the awards and contest administration? As the Internet “snowball” gains momentum at the high school level, Web-based implementation of the competition is rapidly becoming the approach of choice. Not only does use of the Web reduce mailing costs, in most cases it already has much greater market penetration—and this trend will only accelerate.

Another good path is corporate sponsorships—in return for recognition in competition promotional literature and Web sites, many local businesses who are seeking to maintain their image in the community will be willing to lend a hand financially. Beginning with the employers of our Education Committee members, we are learning how to approach companies in the Central Florida area for such sponsorships. Large companies often maintain philanthropy budgets to support community outreach programs. Smaller companies that deal in technical communication products or services can be reached on the basis of their kinship within the profession. The amount of the contribution varies; \$50–\$500 is a good range, depending, obviously, on the size and budget of the sponsor. Overall, our initial forays into the world of corporate sponsorship have been mutually rewarding for the chapter and the companies.

Table 1. Return on Investment on Educational Outreach Initiatives

Activity	Audience	Goal	Outcome	ROI	Disposition
Presentations to college classes	Technical communication majors	Provide “real-world” perspective on our profession	Highly successful	High	Continued
Career fairs	Community colleges	Distribute literature on STC; Q&A	Limited interest	Low	Discontinued
Presentations to high school classes	Teachers, guidance counselors, students	Introduce technical communication as a career alternative	Mixed	Low to Med	Limit to technical communication classes or science classes working on a TC project
Participation in teacher inservice training sessions	Multidisciplinary instructional team	Draw upon principles of TC to enhance teaching of writing	Highly successful	High	Continued
Evaluation of curriculum	County curriculum coordinators	Help select the best materials	Moderate success*	Med	Need to develop materials

*Process was beneficial, but there is a dearth of quality materials.

PROVIDING INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT TO SECONDARY EDUCATION

ROI, or return on investment, is almost a mantra in the business world. The key to profit is to invest resources wisely. The more limited those resources are, the wiser the investment must be.

Taking a leaf out of the business “bible,” our Education Committee is also mindful of *ROI*—but in our case, the capital is *time*, our most precious commodity.

How, then, do we get the best *ROI* on our efforts to enhance the instruction of technical communication?

There are no hard-and-fast rules. A good general guideline is to ask how many students will benefit from a particular effort on our part, and how *much* they will benefit, to the extent that can be quantified. Table 1 lists a few examples from our experience.

Our experience suggests that direct classroom visits are more effective at the college level than they are in high school—owing, no doubt, to the focus of the audience. Panel discussions, workshops, presentations, and portfolio reviews have all been productive with college classes.

As high schools begin to offer courses in technical communication, the *ROI* on classroom visits is likely to improve. Even so, however, we can leverage our contribution by training *teachers* rather than

students—obviously, any skills and tools we give to instructors are going to benefit far more students than we can reach directly.

As for career fairs, we are convinced that instead of staffing a meagerly frequented table at such an event, it would be more productive to host a luncheon with a target audience invited specifically based on interest in our profession. In a word, when you have limited ammunition (read: time), it makes more sense to “sharpshoot” than to “shotgun.”

INSTITUTING MENTORING PROGRAMS

In a classical sense, mentoring implies a pairing of a senior practitioner of an art or profession (the “expert”) with a junior member (the “novice”). Key elements of the relationship are candor and trust, discipline (yet with flexibility), and freedom from conventional reporting lines (e.g., professor/student, supervisor/employee). Three basic variations exist for mentoring within technical communication:

- **Academe-to-academe.** Two possibilities are (1) to pair graduate students (or recent graduates) with undergraduates and (2) to cast professors in an advisory role to students who are not in their classes.
- **Industry-to-industry.** Two applications are (1) to pair experts with novices within specific skill sets and (2) to assign new or junior employees a “Big Brother/Sister” to teach them the ropes—sharing the

intangible political savvy that can only be acquired with years of experience.

- **Industry-to-academe.** This is where STC can make a major contribution, pairing experienced practitioners with college students and possibly also with high school instructors.

For years, our chapter has strongly supported the first and third approaches. STC members, many of whom are “home grown” graduates of the University of Central Florida, speak to classes, evaluate student portfolios, and invite students to conduct workplace interviews. More formally, UCF’s Technical Writing Advisory Board meets every fall to facilitate a community-wide consultation on the types of courses taught in the undergraduate and graduate programs in technical writing. And professors who are formulating a newly proposed Ph.D. in Texts and Technology are currently seeking input and written support from potential students and employers in Central Florida.

We plan to increase our involvement in the second type of mentoring (industry-to-industry) by leveraging the varied expertise of our chapter members through chapter meetings, workshops, and informal “lunch and learn” type initiatives, as well as by encouraging professional networking through a suitable online forum (see Professional Development below).

Such mentoring, coupled with the chapter’s financial support through scholarships, strengthens the bonds of the technical communication community. A chapter’s mentoring efforts may yield an overlooked benefit to the Society: after graduation, erstwhile mentees may become STC members wherever their employment takes them. Once in the fold, always in the fold...

SUPPORTING AND ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most of our activity in the five areas discussed above has focused upon supporting educational institutions in our surrounding community—ranging, literally, from elementary school (where we developed templates to help teachers prepare fourth graders for the Florida Writes exam) to graduate school. It is equally important in our educational initiatives that we reach out to our own *membership* as well.

Indeed, in a profession that is inextricably linked to onrushing technology, continuous professional development is not a luxury, it is essential to our very survival.

In larger chapters, professional development initiatives may be the province of a separate committee. However, we suspect that many chapters, large and small, operate as the Orlando Chapter does—on the enthusiasm and

efforts of a small core of dedicated members. Each elected officer and committee member thus often wears more than one hat, with the result that no one is particularly anxious to undertake chairing another committee.

How, then, can an education committee help promote the professional development of its chapter’s members, in *addition* to its outreach to the surrounding educational community? Drawing on our own experiences, what we have learned from other organizations, and, especially, from the collected wisdom of other STC chapters, the Orlando Chapter has targeted a number of approaches to support the professional development of our members that we plan to tackle in the next few years:

- Work with the program coordinator to develop valuable presentations for chapter meetings
- Support regional conferences with presentations and workshops
- Encourage chapter members to share their professional expertise, initially by presenting at chapter meetings, and providing them with feedback to help them extend their reach to regional and/or international conferences
- Provide financial assistance to help chapter members further their academic training and/or participate in professional development activities such as regional and international conferences, within guidelines for application and distribution of resources
- Sponsor special professional development activities such as half- or full-day training sessions by recognized experts within (or outside) STC, offering discounted rates to members
- Establish listserves and chat rooms to encourage electronic professional networking, problem-solving, and brainstorming
- Foster avenues of community service/pro bono opportunities for members through the vehicle of STC.

This list is by no means exhaustive, and in different years, depending on the leadership and needs of the membership and the community, the approaches undoubtedly will vary. For instance, our chapter vice president, who is in charge of developing programs for chapter meetings, also serves on the Education Committee. This fortuitous overlap has helped us foster professional development by presenting the latest in software products, market trends, and other areas of wide interest.

Moreover, we are delighted to report that many of our chapter members have eagerly volunteered to present programs on topics ranging from Web indexing to

distance learning. Such presentations serve not only to inform the internal professional community, but also to generate increased visibility and recognition of expertise by our employers.

One thing is certain—the faster our profession moves, the more important professional development will be to each individual practitioner.

CONCLUSION

To be productive, an education committee must not only have a clear *vision* of its mission and goals, it must also have the *knowledge* to translate the vision into specific, attainable objectives and the *commitment* to convert the vision into reality.

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the start of a fire.”
—William Butler Yeats

Got a match?

At STC...you betcha!

REFERENCES

- (1) *STC 1999-2004 Strategic Plan*, <http://www.stc-va.org/faboutstc.htm> (internal link to “*Strategic Plan.*”)
- (2) *Ibid.*
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) *Ibid.*, “STC Grants and Scholarships,” internal link.
- (5) *Ibid.*, “Professional Development,” internal link.
- (6) *Ibid.*, “ITCC,” “STC Grants and Scholarships,” internal links.
- (7) Moretto, Lisa A., “Changing How the World Communicates: Secondary Curricula in Technical Communication,” *Proceedings of 43rd Annual STC Conference*, Seattle, WA, May 1996, p. 46.
- (8) Blicq, Ronald S., “Changing How...,” *op. cit.*
- (9) Blicq, Ronald S., “Manitoba Introduces Technical Communication in High Schools,” *Intercom*, April 1995, pp. 6-7.
- (10) Ames, Andrea L., “STC Education and Outreach: Opportunities for the Sacramento Chapter,” http://stc.org/Region8/www/ed-outreach/index.htm#ed-outreach_AA
- (11) Washington, D.C. Chapter Home Page, <http://stc.org/region2/wdc/www/97studentwins.shtml>
- (12) Orlando Chapter Education Committee Home Page, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/education/charter.html>
- (13) *Ibid.*, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/education/goals.html>
- (14) *Ibid.*, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/education/eduyrend.html>
- (15) *Ibid.*, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/education/Pelegrin.html>

- (16) *Ibid.*, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/education/melissa2.htm>
- (17) Orlando Chapter Home Page, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/pressrel/pellegrin.html>
- (18) Orlando Chapter Education Committee Home Page, *op. cit.*, <http://stc.org/region3/orl/www/education/hscomp.htm>
- (19) STC, “Rules for International Student Technical Writing Competitions,” <http://www.stc-va.org/publications/frame.html>, internal link to “Guidelines for International-Level Competitions,” downloadable .pdf file #57-98.

Dan Voss, STC Associate Fellow

Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control-Orlando,
MP 474
5600 Sand Lake Road
Orlando, Florida 32819-8907
daniel.w.voss@lmco.com

Dan Voss is a Communications team leader at Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control-Orlando (LMMFC-O), with 21 years' aerospace experience, and he has also taught high school and college. He is an Associate Fellow in the Society for Technical Communication and is a member of STC's Orlando Chapter, where he manages the Education Committee. He has received the Chapter's Distinguished Service Award. He has also served on STC's Ethics, Certification, Practical Communication, and Special Needs committees and has presented at 10 international and 9 regional STC conferences. With Lori Allen, he co-authored a textbook on ethics in technical communication. He is the only non-engineer ever to earn LMMFC-O's coveted Author-of-the-Year award.

Gail Lippincott, Ph.D.

RGL Solutions
PO Box 1447
Goldenrod, FL 32733-1447
rglsolutions2@earthlink.net

Gail Lippincott is president of RGL Solutions and has taught technical communication at the university level. She completed her Ph.D. in technical communication at the University of Minnesota in December 1999 (her dissertation study was sponsored in part by an STC research grant). She has received an STC graduate scholarship and an excellence award in the Ken Caird Student Article Competition. A senior member of STC, she serves as vice president of the Orlando Chapter and is a member of the Education Committee. She has received the Chapter's Distinguished Service Award for managing four Florida Technical Writing Conferences. She is stem manager for Theory and Research for the 47th Annual Conference.