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The Current Situation

On May 16, 2015, fifteen new technical communication graduates will enter the workforce.

While some have lined up jobs during their final semester, most will be looking for a job opportunity. They must all rely on the skills and knowledge taught to them by the University of North Texas' (UNT) Department of Technical Communication.

Today, graduates should have multiple job opportunities. When companies hear “college degree” and “technical writer” in the same sentence, they’re interested. Employers assume that college-taught technical writers know how to write well. They can interview subject matter experts, decipher complicated information, and relay it to the everyday person. However, with advances in technology, companies now expect technical writers to understand complicated technology and to not just communicate to, but to inspire, an audience.

The best proven approach uses stories to reach the audience on an emotional level. From early childhood, we are exposed to tales and lessons to teach safety and life skills. But stories are more than Grimm’s fairytales. People used stories to record and spread history and information long before the invention of writing. From D.A.R.E. programs to keep our children safe to TED talks to inspire innovation, we are surrounded by stories.

But many programs are unable to teach both storytelling and technical writing skills. The curriculum is focused on teaching the latest technology and writing skills that inspiration are forgotten. Currently, the UNT Department of Technical Communication focuses on the technical writing application: writing coherently, proposal and procedural writing, and creating brochures, but companies already expect that these new graduates can write. What the department needs to create are true communicators.

Technical Communication Backstory

In the years after World War II, the technical communication field flourished. Aerospace and defense contractors began to hire technical writers to produce the numerous reports, procedures, and proposals needed to meet new government requirements. When technical writers first emerged into the field, they had little technical training. What set them apart was their ability to write and edit. But, since the ‘50s, technology has been on an upward trend (Hayhoe).

Panelists for the Future Skill and Technology Panel at the 2004 STC Annual Conference discussed the recent shift in the technical communication field. Up through the '90s, simply knowing how to write well was enough to find a job. However, over the past ten years, employers now assume that technical communicators can write, since they have a degree, and instead are looking for technology skills. Albers argues that “technical communicators need to continue to learn new technologies and tools to remain competitive and employable” (Albers).

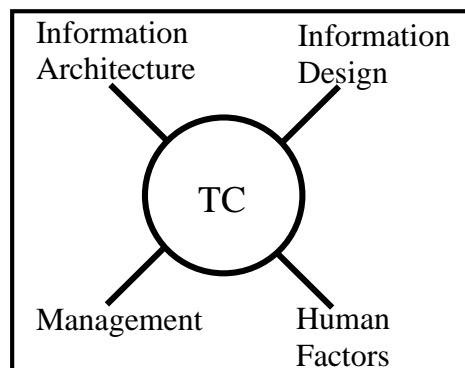


Figure 1: Expansion of Technical Communication (Albers)

The panelists remarked that the technical communicators they worked with focused on crafting the perfect sentences instead of learning the technology and solving the communication issues between specific audiences. New technical communicators need to branch out into other areas, as illustrated by Figure 1, like information architecture, information design, human factors, and management.

(They noted that management and business knowledge are an important missing factor in “the technical communicator’s toolbox of soft skills.”) “It’s not a simple matter of each junior writer’s having to make a choice and follow [one of the paths listed above]. Instead, from the beginning of their education as technical communicators through their retirement, writers need to be exposed to all five areas [writing, information design and architecture, human factors, and management] and gain the knowledge required to be conversant in the concepts and technologies of each” (Albers).

As Albers suggests, new technology and skills cannot simply be taught once to master a specific path. Technology is vast and ever-evolving. The '80s and '90s saw a new wave in computers and electronic technology. The 2000s featured web design and content writing to reach an even larger audience. While technical communication departments can teach students a cursory understanding of new technologies, learning everything just through a college curriculum would be impossible. Instead, they must teach students how to teach themselves. So, while new graduates may be entering the technical communication field unprepared in specific technology skills, universities can still help.

The Solution to Meet the Industry's Future

The answer is storytelling.

The UNT Department of Technical Communication strives to create great technical writers. Students take courses over manuals and procedures, proposals and grants, technical editing, and writing in the sciences where they spend 16 weeks learning how to structure and write technical documents. Proposals, manuals, brochures, and procedures are standard documents in the technical field and are expected knowledge for new hires in a company. But being able to write well is expected. Good writing alone will no longer get graduates into an interview. It's time to put focus on the communication part of our degree. We are not just writers; we are technical communicators.

Storytelling uses the common pathos rhetorical strategy to invoke an emotional feeling in the audience. Many of the classes focus on using logic and facts to simply convey information. Stories are more than children's fairytales. Like parables, stories can reach and instruct the audience on an emotional level. Studies show that people are more likely to trust and engage with information when it's told to them through narrative. In 2006, researchers in Spain used an MRI machine to scan participants to see how their brain reacted to words. "When subjects looked at the Spanish words for "perfume" and "coffee," their primary olfactory cortex lit up; when they saw the words that mean "chair" and "key," this region remained dark" (Paul). Metaphors also intrigued the brain. In 2012 researchers from Emory University studied participants' brain's reactions to metaphors like "The singer had a velvet voice" or "He had leathery hands." Metaphors roused the sensory cortex while phrases like "The singer had a pleasing voice" did not.

Apply Stories in Business to Stand Out

Learning to craft a narrative can be helpful to students on multiple levels. New college graduates will be the newcomers at their job. They will be the least experienced and potentially the youngest employee. They can use storytelling to compel senior coworkers on an idea and back up their skills. New graduates can write the problem and solution, but they need to be able to explain "the why" to influence others to understand why they should invest time or money in an idea. Storytelling also will simply improve students' writing. In an interview with Harvard Business Review editor Bronwyn Fryer, Dr. Robert McKee, a world renowned screenwriting

lecturer, explained that stories “fulfill a profound human need to grasp the patterns of living—not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience. . . . Stories are how we remember; we tend to forget lists and bullet points” (McKee).

I used the storytelling technique in an informational brochure for a client project to great success. Brochures traditionally are written factually and rely on the document design to create interest. My group, instead, chose to write the process in the form of a story, which made the highly technical and potentially alarming egg donation process personal. The client was impressed with the idea and is currently using the story idea to create her official brochures. For her, a story brochure is a compelling way to stand out from her competitors because many marketing groups aren’t using the strategy.

While you may think that its scarcity is a reason to avoid it, in fact storytelling has taken over the business world. Large companies, like GE, are looking to hire business storytellers: people who can take data or the company name and describe it in a way to make someone care. “Data frightens people, and when they are frightened, they won’t share with you. Instead, this new hire should be able to use your data to tell marketing stories about real people, real customers and real solutions” (Maycotte). New jobs are being created just for young people who have the technical knowledge to interpret data and the skill to convey it.

According to GE CMO Beth Comstock, “all storytellers are not created equal and the thing that separates them is passion. A great storyteller of GE must also love science and have curiosity” (Bhargava). One thing she looks for in potential hires is the ability to make the invisible visible.

When you make big, intimidating, world-shifting products like a jet engine [or an MRI machine] the individuals behind the scenes can lose their sense of purpose. “Yet if you can bring that engineer to the first flight of the aircraft using that engine, or connect the designer of the new MRI machine to the cancer patient who ends up using it then you can make the impact of what they do come to life” (Bhargava).

Tell Stories through Images

But storytelling doesn't have to be just words. Those who are more comfortable with graphic or document design can use the same tactics. For instance, back to my client project, my group created a family tree to represent the company, shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: EDS family tree

A family tree invokes comfort and warmth of a close family, but, unlike an antiquated, traditional family tree that could cause the audience to be guilty about donating their legacy, ours was modern. It had sleek lines and minimal color that gave the impression that egg donation is the new, modern way to start a family. A reader had a conversation with the company all through one image.

GE has promoted storytelling since the '50s. The 1930s through the '50s was the golden age of American comics. The popular superheroes who are currently being reenvisioned into blockbuster hits, like Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman first made their comic debut. GE decided to use the comic craze to teach kids about science and inspire new innovators. They printed batches of 500,000 to 3 million that featured titles like “Adventures inside the Atom,” as seen in Figure 3. One issue even described how to make an artificial diamond (GE Reports). Today, they continue to reach out to the future generation by taking up social media.

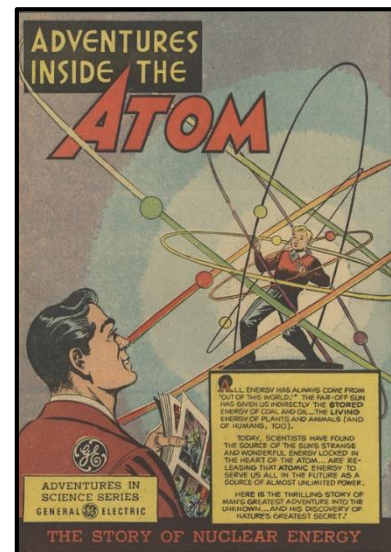


Figure 3: GE Comic

Use Social Media for Large-Scale Engagement

Our current social media community craves constant content, but delete and ignore businesses who simply post product ads or dry text. Only the companies who are able to engage with their consumers are able to keep their interest. GE's goal is to “highlight technology in a fun and engaging way by using new platforms and pivoting off cultural trends” (Wong). So they took to Instagram with one of their campaigns, #GEInstaWalk.

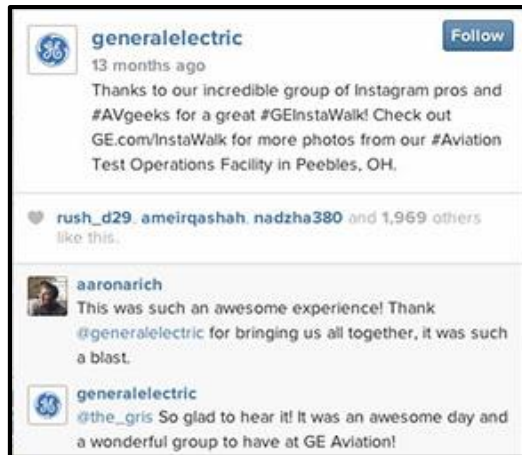


Figure 4: GE "InstaWalk" social media feed

They invited six Instagram influencers and six GE super fans to take a tour of the jet engine test facility in Peebles, OH, as seen in Figure 4. With the help of their Instagram guests, GE turned big metal machines into surreal, larger than life inspiration. They received 3.5 million new Instagram followers and 200K social engagements in the first 48 hours.

Storytelling has many applications. By teaching undergraduates storytelling, UNT professional and technical communication graduates will be one step ahead of the competition and will be prepared for the new wave in business. But how can we get there?

The Effects of the New Course

If UNT's professional and technical communication department created a required Business Storytelling course, and made a few edits in the other course curriculum, they would be on track to educate and produce successful graduates to meet the future job market. Many classes in the current degree plan include elements of storytelling; however, they are all electives. Many students won't be able take some of these offered courses, like TECM 3500 or 3100, or the focus of these courses may change depending on the professor teaching it that semester. A required course would assure that each student received the same instruction over storytelling basics and application in varying technical documents and situations.

Since the department is currently unable to teach courses over specific technology, the business storytelling course would show students how to sell their current knowledge and skills to employers during interviews or on the job. One of the greatest skills students can learn is the ability to teach themselves and persuade others to see their potential. The English department features entire degree plans over rhetorical persuasion. But for many, the coursework is too daunting.

The Department of Technical Communication is missing an opportunity to gain many new students. Currently, the department is marketed to English majors to get the technical writing certificate to improve their English degree. The certificate gives them tangible evidence of their editing and writing abilities to help find jobs. Instead, with a business storytelling class, the tech. comm. department could appeal to the current and future storytellers and writers as a way to use their narrative analysis skills and love for writing to actually find a job.

English-minded students will come to the department with the ability to either write stories or understand the components of good stories. They will look for the way to hone their technical skills. Tech. comm. students, on the other hand, are very familiar with the steps to write documents and marketing copy. But they are challenged with telling stories to inspire their audience. Companies are creating jobs for young technical writers because they are believed to be the most in touch with new technology, but currently our graduates aren't prepared for them.

Create a Marketable Future

UNT is one of two schools in Texas who offer a technical communication major. Our professional and technical communication degree is frequently listed in the top ten tech. comm. degrees in the US, while many colleges only offer technical writing as a concentration of an English degree. Our department is already ahead of the curve. The program took the step to create two courses over digital media and web design to meet the new rise in technology. With the addition of a business storytelling course, the professional and technical communication degree will be more marketable to future graduates and current students and incoming high school seniors (and their parents). With the influx of students, the tech. comm. department could continue to grow and add courses and opportunities to teach students to meet the future and distinguish themselves from the competition.

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