Inside This Issue

Christine Pellar-Kosbar at the front desk

Letter From the Editor
by Christine Pellar-Kosbar

Happy spring, finally!

Well, in January, I thought we'd miss the snow and ice. Not quite. We certainly got that blast, but green is coming, and now that daylight saving time is earlier (causing anyone any problems?), we'll have daylight for our drives out to program meetings. Troy is the location for our next program. We'll be teaming up with the Michigan Usability Professionals' Association (MIUPA) for a discussion about corporate Web standards and usability.

Also upcoming is an April Detroit Networking Lunch. The bitter cold put a damper on our February lunch, so we're trying again to get out to New Parthenon at 547 Monroe Avenue on Thursday, April 12. Our January lunch was attended by four Detroit-based STC members and two members of MIUPA.

Also in April, at our April program, Jason Withrow of Washtenaw Community College is going to talk about how to create Websites using cascading style sheets.

At the international level, the latest news on the STC International Conference is the new certificate programs. For more information about those, see page 7 or visit http://www.stc.org/54thConf/precon/certPrograms.asp

Here are some pictures from the Internet User Experience from Dunrie Grieling. For more pictures of Internet User Experience, visit flikr:
http://www.flickr.com/groups/internetuserexperience/pool/

Anthony Viviano talks about STC/SM

Erin Moulton at the front desk

Cool Tools
by Mary Jo David, Programs Co-chair

I'm sure I'm not the first writer to change the subject of her column midstream through the research. I was part way through checking out some online style guides when I happened upon a site I had never been to before: The Internet Public Library (IPL) at www.ipl.org.

This is one of those sites that just makes you shake your head and say again, "What did we do before the Internet?" Well, I'm old enough to tell you what we did. We used the public libraries.

So, needless to say, I was thrilled to find the IPL site and even more thrilled to find that it has homegrown roots in that it was founded in Michigan—specifically, at the University of Michigan. (IPL is hosted by Drexel University's College of Information Science and Technology.)

Finding Sources

Use the IPL to look up online links to all sorts of Subject Collections (Business, Computers, and Law, to name a few), Ready References, Reading Rooms, Blogs, and even KidSpace and TeenSpace collections. And while you're at it, don't be shy about making suggestions to the IPL for sites they can add. In fact, I just finished requesting that they add the STC to their Associations list.

Another helpful resource when it comes to finding sources of information is Diana Hacker's *Research and Documentation in the Electronic Age.* The book is available in its 4th Edition through Bedford/St. Martin's.

But for those who prefer the convenience of online access to information in one of four major disciplines—Humanities, Social Sciences, History, and Sciences—the following site is very useful:

http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/manual.html

Citing Sources

Citing sources isn't just for academics. If you use someone else's words or ideas, you need to cite them. If you've been out of school for a while and find yourself in the position of having to cite sources only occasionally, the Internet has made it extremely easy to refresh your memory on correctly citing sources.

Of course, there isn't really one correct way. In fact, a company style guide or style sheet should include a guideline referencing which standard people should follow when they need to cite sources in company publications.

For a convenient list of a number of helpful source-citing sites, again use the IPL; specifically, go to: http://www.ipl.org/div/farq/netciteFARQ.html. In addition, a large part of the dianahacker.com site is devoted to documenting sources correctly.

But don't stop there. Why not try a few of the Internet sites that feature automatic citation generators. The trick is double checking the results because the results are not always error-free.

Don't forget, if you know of a cool tool, write me and let me know, so we can consider sharing it with others through this column. You can reach me at maryjo@writeawayent.com.

Upcoming Event From the West Michigan Shores STC

The West Michigan Shores STC Chapter meeting for January will take place in Kalamazoo on Thursday, April 5.

The topic will be "Search Engines, Wikis, and Blogs, oh my!"

Full registration information is at www.wms-stc.org/events.htm

STC/SM Leadership
2006-2007
Executive Council

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Member Spotlight: Kathleen Belanger
by Elaine Wisniewski

Kathleen Belanger has been a member of STC for five years and has a bachelor of arts degree in English. For the past three years she has been the webmaster for our Southeastern Michigan Chapter.

Why did you decide to join STC?

My first job as a technical writer was with a team of writers. On my second job I was a lone writer and missed the support and feedback I got from a team. STC provided the support I needed as well as the opportunity to expand my knowledge of good writing and editing skills, cutting-edge technologies, and the latest and best tools of the trade.

Why did you decide to pursue technical communication as a career?

I like to write and use illustrations to communicate and am fascinated with modern technology.

Where are you currently employed?

I am a technical communicator for MasterCard Worldwide in the Troy, Michigan, office.

What are your job activities at MasterCard?

I write and update internal technical manuals, write articles for member release updates, and edit online member manuals.

What are some example projects that you are particularly proud of?

In my previous position, I created a quick reference in HTML that tellers could use on their teller platform to replace printed materials that were not always easy to locate or easy to update. I also created relational databases that I could use to easily update manuals.

How has being a member of STC helped you with your career?

I have benefited greatly from the educational resources STC has provided as well as the interaction with chapter members and SIGs. When I have questions on the job, I know I have resources. I also feel that belonging to STC keeps me aware of the latest tools and technologies I need to make me an effective communicator. Our chapter programs have been a great resource for networking and expanding my horizons.

What advice do you have for students as they are entering the field of technical communication?

This is a field that will continue to fascinate. It is difficult to keep up with new technologies. It is also a challenge to communicate to those affected how to use and benefit from modern technological marvels. This job requires life-long learning but has endless possibilities.

My Internet User Experience
by Christine Pellar-Kosbar

The Internet User Experience (IUE) took place February 19 to 22 at Washtenaw Community College. The IUE included two days of tutorials and two days of presentations related to usability. I was able to attend a tutorial on card sorting and several of the presentations on usability. In our next *TechComments* issue, I'll cover the card sorting tutorial and a card sort I helped run for my company. In this article, I'll discuss the presentations I heard and how they've shaped my attitudes and questions about user testing.

The conference reminded me of Michigan Technological University. At Tech, the curriculum emphasized the usability of documentation, and students performed user tests of the docs. At my internship, I started as a user tester, trying to install an NCR cash register with the documentation.

In contrast, during my early days in the work world, user testing always seemed to be something that would get done in a perfect world but didn't absolutely need to be done in the real world because "we know our customers." Well, no. No, we don't. And the message that I left the conference with was that, as hard as it is to accept (and I found it very, very hard to accept), we don't always, or even usually, know our users.

Technical writers tend to think of ourselves as advocates for the user. We try to figure out where users might get lost and try to catch the problems before they become problems. In fact, tech writers often cannot take the place of user input. Watching these presentations showed me that. Unfortunately, they also showed me how difficult it is to persuade others that users have different perspectives and different needs from everyone designing the product, even the tech writers (blast it all).

Web Site Evolutions

The first two presentations I saw, one from a Tec-Ed representative and another from Enlighten and Techstreet representatives, covered the evolutions of two new company Web sites.

Techstreet and Tec-Ed both wanted potential clients to be able to find their products and services more easily. (Techstreet sells engineering standards; Tec-Ed performs usability testing.) For Techstreet, the real challenge was to simplify the site so people could find information that was there but buried. For Ted-Ed, the challenge was to relocate text-heavy research information under more friendly pages that explained clearly what the company did. In both cases, the original site designers emphasized their need for an outsider to help redesign the site and for users to test the site.

To me, it seemed clear that the insiders were too familiar with and too attached to the old sites. (And, by the way, my company has just redesigned its Web site, and I'd also become used to the old one and didn't see a need for many of the changes made. Now I do.)

Remote Seminars From STC International

STC International sponsors remote seminars. Full seminar descriptions and registration information are available at: www.stc.org/edu/seminarsList01.asp

March 28, 2007
Visible: The New Valuable
Presenter(s): Austin Skaggs and Christine Granger

April 11, 2007
Creating Interactive CBTs with Captivate-in Half the Time
Presenter(s): Kevin Siegel

May 2, 2007
Choosing the Right Usability Technique (to answer the right question)
Presenter(s): Whitney Quesenbery

MIUPA April Meeting

The Michigan Usability Professionals Association (MIUPA) is holding a joint meeting with STC/SM in March. (See page 8 for details.)

MIUPA is also meeting in April. The topic is "Alarming Usability: Optimizing the Design of an Alarm Clock."

Check the MIUPA Web site for details: www.miupa.org

Ann Arbor ASTD Upcoming Events

The Ann Arbor Chapter of the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) hosts monthly meetings at Washtenaw Community College.

On April 19, the topic is "More than Smile-sheets."

Registration information is at: www.astdannarbor.org/programs.html

Lawrence Technological University Open House

Lawrence Technological University is hosting a Graduate Open House on Wednesday March 28, 2007.

Time: 6:00 - 7:30pm.
Buell Management Bldg. Atrium
21000 West Ten Mile Road
Southfield, Michigan 48075-1058

- Enjoy hors d'oeuvres.
- Meet with faculty.
- Apply for graduate school.

Lawrence Tech's Master of Science in Technical and Professional Communication

Lawrence Tech's Master of Science in Technical and Professional Communication (MSTC) is designed as a comprehensive, theory- and practice-oriented program of graduate study that prepares students for leadership, management, and consulting roles in the fields of technical and professional communication. The MSTC also enables students to pursue doctoral studies or research in academic, corporate, or governmental environments.

This degree requires 30 credit hours, 12 of which can be earned from elective and special topics courses. Six practicum options are also available, and students are able to earn up to 6 credit hours for practicum work.

Depending on the emphasis of their course of study and professional interests, MSTC students will be able to acquire skills and expertise to:

- Design , produce, and evaluate the various types of technical and professional communication required by diverse audiences
- Use verbal, visual, analytical, and computer skills to create and enhance communication in professional environments
- Apply major rhetorical theories of technical and professional discourse to achieve specific communication objectives
- Apply emerging electronic technologies and other media to the creation of various publications and presentations
- Gain insight into the current research methodologies applicable to the fields of technical and professional communication.
- Supervise publications, information design, and information management functions in organizations
- Develop presentation techniques that focus on the expectations of different audiences

Storytelling and Podcasting: New Media for Technical Communication

by Erin Moulton

As technical writers, we are accustomed to expressing technical information using print documentation, Help systems, and Web sites. On January 25, Timothy Keirnan and Professor Corinne Stavish of Lawrence Technological University (LTU) brought new ideas about how to disseminate technical information in exciting ways.

Keirnan illustrated how podcasts can be used in various formats to instruct users. Podcasts consist of various types, including procedural, narrative, and conceptual. Many podcasts simply use sound while others also employ visuals and video to convey their message to the users. Many of his examples focused on podcasts found on the Internet; however, he discussed several possibilities in which companies can use podcasts, such as in training, meetings, and even as tools in technical Help.

Stavish believes that storytelling is the most effective way to communicate. In her presentation, she discussed how technical communicators can use narrative to make the information more meaningful to their audience. She feels communication mistakes are due to poor listening and communication skills. Using her storytelling and her experience working with NASA engineers, she shared how we can relate technical information to something the audience is familiar with.

Keirnan created and co-hosts a podcast called, "Design Critique: Products for People," which encourages usable product design (www.designcritique.net). He currently works in the IT Department of a financial services company and has a bachelor's in audio engineering and a master's in technical communication.

Stavish is a professor in Humanities at LTU. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in the Technical and Professional Communication Program and is acting director of that program. She consults with corporations and gives presentations on communication skills, presentation skills, team building, and leadership development. Additionally, she tours the country as a storyteller and keynote speaker.

It was a thought-provoking program, and we had an exceptional turnout from professionals and students. LTU hosted the program in the Lear Auditorium.

Small Business: In a Nutshell
by Andrea Frazier

At the February 27 program meeting, Christopher Juillet, PLC, gave a presentation, "Small Business: In a Nutshell," at Creative Solutions in Dexter. Juillet, a solo-practice attorney based in Ann Arbor, has been in the high-tech industry since 1979 as a writer, publisher, and consultant. His law practice focuses on small business, estate planning, real estate, Internet, e-commerce, and intellectual property law.

The program, aimed at those who may be considering going into business for themselves, provided an introduction to small-business concerns, including business entity issues, contracts, copyright, and trademark issues.

Much of Juillet's presentation focused on the importance of choosing an appropriate business entity when you are forming a small business. He discussed the pros and cons of sole proprietorships, partnerships, LLCs (limited liability companies), and corporations. Some factors to consider when you are choosing a business entity include tax issues, risk (including protection of personal assets), and medical insurance.

Juillet then described the scope and purpose of a variety of contracts one might encounter in operating a small business. These include employment contracts, nondisclosure/noncompete agreements, and vendor agreements. He then outlined some copyright and trademark issues, including registration, infringement, and enforcement. He also touched on some Internet and domain-name legal issues, such as Web site legal audits, "cybersquatting," and metatags and trademarks.

He concluded with some recommendations on how to work most efficiently and economically with an attorney, depending on the purpose of your consultation.

Christopher Juillet is a fellow of the STC and served as assistant to the president for Professional Interest Committees from 1992 to 1995. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in journalism from the University of Michigan and a juris doctor degree from Detroit College of Law at Michigan State University.

Member Spotlight: Kathleen Belanger
by Elaine Wisniewski (cont.)

Any career/academic/personal achievements in the tech comm field that you'd like to share?

I volunteered for the Web Committee for our Southeastern Michigan Chapter three years ago so that I could learn about Web development. At that time the current webmaster was ready to resign. I learned a lot very quickly and am still learning but am grateful for the opportunity.

Any other comments you'd like to include?

I thoroughly enjoy my job and my field. My membership in STC has been a great resource for support and education.

STC/SM MIUPA Downtown Detroit Networking Luncheons

When: Thursday, April 12

Where: New Parthenon at 547 Monroe Avenue

STC/SM Volunteer Opportunities

If any of the following volunteer opportunities sounds intriguing to you, please send an email message to nominations@stc-sm.org. An inquiry is not a commitment, and duties/tasks are always negotiable.

Hosts for Detroit/Suburb Networking Events

Make arrangements with a Detroit area restaurant, let people know the event is happening, greet people at the event, and make them feel welcome.

Hosts for Ann Arbor Networking Events

Make arrangements with an Ann Arbor area restaurant, let people know the event is happening, greet people at the event, and make them feel welcome.

Membership Chair

Welcome new members with a letter and offer of support.

Postcard Designer

Design and mail postcards for each program meeting.

Reminder: Chapter Competition Dry Run
by Laura Allen, Professional Liaison

Competition materials, including entry and judging forms, are being uploaded to the chapter Web site. An announcement will be posted to the chapter listserv once upload is completed. Competition entries will now be accepted until April 16. Judging will occur between April 17 – May 7.

Feel free to contact the professional liaison (profliaison@stc-sm.org) with any questions or feedback, or to volunteer.

My Internet User Experience
by Christine Pellar-Kosbar (cont.)

Tone and Standardization of Web Sites

John Yesko of Roundarch, Inc., in his session, compared several sites that his company had redesigned. Yesko focused on the use of tone in the text and on familiar standards, such as the Web shopping cart icon and use of the word "sale." Yesko made it clear that sometimes companies go too far with their branding and forget that Web customers now have very particular expectations about how to make a purchase. Yesko suggested that having a consistent tone (both within the site and between the site and other media) is important, but it is more important that people be able to easily locate the "Buy now" button.

Creating User-Friendly Web Application

In his session, Brian Phelps, a usability practitioner at Pfizer, Inc., described his trials recreating a Web application that allowed chemists to purchase chemicals. The purchasing tool was mandated by Pfizer, but it was so confusing to use that chemists used outside tools.

Phelps tested in rounds, with three to four users each round, watching users perform tasks. It took at least four rounds to make a noticeable difference in the amount of time a chemist took to figure out how to make a purchase.

Chemists had designed the original application, but they were chemists working in a very different environment from the intended users. Even here, testing, testing, and more testing was the only way to see why users were avoiding the application.

Web Site Commonalities and Expectations

I couldn't help but notice that in the "before-and-after" Web site comparisons, the "after" sites had a lot in common with each other—navigation was similar and, of course, they all had lots of images of people's faces. Even the chemical purchasing application had very similar navigation to the sites in other presentations.

I wonder if, in ten years, sites will be as standardized as books are now or whether we'll see lots of trends come and go (for books and sites). I suspect sites will become very similar—or types of sites will be very similar—as people become more and more familiar with Web sites and expectations become set.

At some point, will user testing become unnecessary because expectations for site navigations and look-and-feel will be well established? Will usability studies always be necessary, or will we come to a point where usability is well researched and "finished"? Or will people and technology change, with new ways to transmit information, so that Web sites and books will both represent an ever decreasing percentage of knowledge transfer?

This conference led me to believe that we are heading toward strong de facto standardized Web sites. At March's program meeting, I'll be interested to see how close we are.

Certificate Program at STC Conference

Registration is going on right now for the Minneapolis STC International Conference. This year the conference features five certificate programs.

Tech Comm 101

Designed for potential, new, and returning technical communicators, Tech Comm 101 presents the key skills and theories needed by those in the field. Learn through hands-on exercises, real-world examples, and plenty of discussion.

Undiscovered Country: Taking Your Information Design to the Next Level

This advanced seminar in information design, will first cover how people learn, think, and structure information in their minds, as well as the nature of reality and perception. Then, participants will examine taxonomies, schemas, and shared feature analyses. This workshop uses group activities and hands-on writing exercises to help participants apply the theories and ideas presented.

The Science and Art of Effective Interface Design

This seminar explores both the science and art of user interface design, and presents a comprehensive approach to designing interfaces that optimize both user performance and visual appeal. Drawing on studies of user behavior as well as modern principles of visual design, this seminar explains how to design for target users, create navigation structures that make sense, and avoid common design pitfalls. Real-world examples illustrate the concepts taught in this seminar.

Moving to Content Management: From Justification to Implementation

This seminar provides an overview of content management systems (CMS) and the issues associated with identifying and implementing CMS in an organization. It explores how to evaluate content needs, how to make a business case for moving to a CMS, how to choose a CMS that meets specified needs, and how to structure content with XML.

Successfully Managing Geographically Dispersed Teams

Your technical team, writing staff, and editing group are located in three different cities. How do you keep everyone focused on the group's goals, deliverables, and quality standards when you have to manage across several time zones and locations? Through hands-on exercises, this session explores these challenges and offers practical advice.

Some of these sessions begin before the conference. For more information and to register, visit: http://www.stc.org/54thConf/precon/certPrograms.asp

Joint STC/SM- MIUPA March Program

Creating and Evangelizing a Corporate Web Standards & Usability Program
presented by Deb Ermiger

As the leader of EDS's Web Standards & Usability Program, Deb Ermiger has been working in online communications since 1994. Her work has spanned many areas, including writing, editing, graphic design, information architecture, usability testing, and, yes, even some coding.

Deb currently leads a cross-organizational team of experts in the documentation and delivery of user interface standards and guidelines for the Web. Her team also provides consulting to EDS Web sites and client accounts.

Particulars:

Date:	Wednesday, March 28
Time:	6:30 pm: networking and appetizers 7 pm: speaker's presentation
Location:	EDS 750 Tower Drive Troy, MI
Price:	$15 for STC or MIUPA members $20 for nonmembers $10 for students belonging to STC or MIUPA $12 for students not belonging to STC or MIUPA **ADD $5 for registrations postmarked after March 23 and for walk-ins**

Registration:
Preregister by Friday, March 23 for a $5 discount off the at-the-door registration price. Please register by email at register@stc-sm.org or by mail at:

Registration for March STC Program
22951 Thorncliffe
Southfield, MI 48033

If you wish to get the discounted rate, please be sure to mail in your payment so that we receive it by Friday, March 23 .

Parking: Free parking available

STC/SM April Program
CSS and Modern, Accessible Web Design
presented by Jason Withrow

In this presentation, Jason Withrow will describe the use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) in modern Web site layouts. Jason will describe positioning and floats and explain when to use each. He'll also detail best practices for coding, such as separating structure, presentation, and behavior to
- enhance accessibility
- reduce maintenance costs
- simplify the redesign process

Jason Withrow has worked in the web development industry for more than six years in roles such as
- information architect
- usability engineer
- business analyst

He has been an instructor in the Internet Professional Program at Washtenaw Community College for a number of years, teaching classes in
- user experience
- web coding
- project management
- professional practices
- web design

He holds master's degrees in both psychology and information.

Particulars:

Date:	Tuesday, April 24, 6 - 9 p.m.
Time:	6:30 pm: networking and appetizers 7 pm: speaker's presentation
Location:	Washtenaw Community College 4800 E Huron River Dr Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1610
Price:	$15 for STC members $20 for nonmembers $10 for students belonging to STC $12 for students not belonging to STC **Add $5 for registrations postmarked after April 20 and for walk-ins**

Registration:
Preregister by Friday, April 20 for a $5 discount off the at-the-door registration price. Please register by email at register@stc-sm.org or by mail at:

Registration for April STC Program
22951 Thorncliffe
Southfield, MI 48033

If you wish to get the discounted rate, please be sure to mail in your payment so that we receive it by Friday, April 20.
Parking: Free parking available