

TECHNIQUES

Improving the Quality and Effectiveness of Technical Communication Fall 2007



SOCIETY FOR
TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION

Embracing Technological Advancement in the Classroom

by Karli Bartlow-Davis

As technology progresses, the world of academia is shifting gears more toward a tech-based learning environment in the classroom. Courses are frequently being scheduled in computer labs or in mediated classrooms where electronic resources can be accessed and utilized for curriculum instruction. Other students study in hybrid or completely online environments.

Conservative teachers, clinging to the old school style of classroom management, are quick to point out the negative implications of putting technology at students' fingertips during classroom time. In an age where classroom material has to compete with an increasing number of distractions, some teachers would rather avoid handing students an excuse not to pay attention in class. As Jeffrey Young points out in his article "The Fight for Classroom Attention: Professor vs. Laptop" from the June 2, 2006 edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the worry on the part of some professors is that students will "direct about as much attention to the front of the room as airline passengers do to a flight attendant reviewing safety information."¹

Many professors have gone so far as to ban laptops and other technologies from the classroom in an effort to maintain student focus. Critics of these tactics will argue that limited student attention is not a fault of the technology or the student, but rather a shortcoming on the part of the instructor—had the professor been willing to engage students more during lessons, the students wouldn't feel the need to occupy themselves otherwise.

The response of the professor who says it is her job to teach, not to entertain the students, sparks the growing debate over the role of classroom management in a society where entertainment venues are multiplying and attention spans are shrinking. The central question is how to fashion a middle ground where students learn while minimizing the opportunity for them to give into technological distractions.

For professors who are willing to embrace the growing technology trend, there are a multitude of uses for computers in the classroom. From keeping a journal on a blog to utilizing chat rooms for enhancing class discussions to conducting a paperless class, professors are realizing the potential for new student interactions in technology. Some are even finding ways to utilize social networking sites—a major pastime of students outside of the classroom and a major nuisance for anti-technology instructors—as part of the class curriculum.

At Stanford University, BJ Fogg has created a course around the most popular social networking site on college campuses—Facebook.² Along with Dave McClure and Dan Ackerman Greenberg, Fogg has constructed a computer science class that uses Facebook's popularity to teach program design principles. According to the class website, "students will learn how to create, launch, and optimize web applications," and in doing so, will learn "how metrics and user feedback can help developers and product managers improve their applications."³

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From the Editor

First off, thank you for checking out the newly redesigned issue of TECHNIQUES! We hope that the material included in this issue will provide you with some current hot topics in technical communication, and give you insight into what Minnesota State Mankato students are interested in.

As the semester break approaches, I am both completely stressed by final projects (such as this redesign!) and eagerly anticipating leisure activities. Two books I plan to read during break are *The Year of Living Biblically* by A.J. Jacobs and *I Sold My Soul on eBay* by Hemant Mehta.

Jacobs' novel is exactly what its title implies: he lives out an entire year by following the Bible as literally as he can! His account brings about some truly bizarre and humorous situations.

Mehta, a self-proclaimed atheist, accounts of his experience about how he put his "soul" up for sale on eBay, only to find out that the high bidder was a pastor! The pastor then asked him to attend church and report back on his experiences.

My family will also be visiting my brother in Texas for Christmas, and we plan to enjoy the warm weather!

What are your plans for break?

We welcome comments from our readers. Please send feedback to our editors or faculty advisors listed in the staff section at the left.

Embracing Technological Advancement...

(continued from page 1)

Courses like Fogg's are popping up in increasing numbers on campuses across the nation. Many colleges and universities are offering classes that utilize technology as a means for enhancing the educational experience—from online classes to classes held in computer labs, from virtual classroom software to course-specific computer programs. And it's not just computer science classes, either. The embracing of technology seems to be a phenomenon that is sweeping across interdepartmental boundaries. Art departments are embracing the growth of digital design; math classes are able to use computer programs that chart equations; language classes can use internet software to connect to people and places across the globe; history, political science, and English classes can involve projects where students write research papers intended to be presented as articles on user-written

resources like the popular internet resource Wikipedia. These sorts of developments seem to be a small part of what is only the continuation of an educational revolution.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Young, "The Fight for Classroom Attention: Professor vs. Laptop," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 39 (2006): A27.
2. BJ Fogg, *The Stanford Facebook Class*, Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab, <<http://credibilityserver.stanford.edu/captology/facebook/>>.
3. Fogg, *The Stanford Facebook Class*.

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- Fogg, BJ. *The Stanford Facebook Class*. Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab. <<http://credibilityserver.stanford.edu/captology/facebook/>>.
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Taxes in World of Warcraft?

by Matthew Bynum

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have made a huge impact on society not only socially but also economically. Since their graphical evolution from the text-based Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) of the 1980's, MMORPGs have revolutionized how people meet and communicate all over the world. From World of Warcraft, dominating America's online gaming community with 9 million subscribers, to Lineage 2 being the biggest with 14 million subscribers (mostly in Asia), MMORPGs have rewritten the rules of engagement when it comes to social culture.

MMOs used to be limited to computers with a fast internet connection. Now that cable modems are the norm and PCs capable of playing MMOs are a dime a dozen, MMOs have moved into the console market with games like Final Fantasy XI, Phantasy Star Online, and the Halo trilogy. Consoles have also made their own online market place, X-Box Live, Playstation Network, and the Wii Mall.

MMOs have certainly changed the way gamers interact with each other by the means of utilizing a chat feature and player versus player combat. Both of these technologies are nothing new, but when put together under the addictive system of MMOs, they become tools for a new world in the hands of the players. MMOs are geared for both hard core gamers and casual gamers alike. Hard core gamers can spend all day doing quests for rare, hard-to-find items, while casual gamers can do a few missions as a way to unwind after class or work, all the while chatting with a friend that could be on the opposite side of the country. MMOs are a new way for gamers to socialize with each other.

The economic impact was felt in June of 2003 when Julian Dibbell (a writer for the Legal Affairs magazine) undertook the quest (no pun intended) of making money from the online game Ultima Online her primary source of income. In April of 2004, Julian reported to the IRS that her primary source of income was the sale of imaginary goods from the MMORPG. Reporting her profit only raised questions about

the items that she had not sold for real money. Upon further investigation of IRS tax law, specifically Publication 525, the aforementioned items could fall under the bartering income category. According to the IRS Publication 525, bartering is an exchange of property or services. Even though the property is virtual, both parties agree upon a price and then exchange items. After traveling to her local tax office and being transferred to four different departments over the phone, Julian came to the conclusion that the IRS had no specific law outlining what to do with virtual goods obtained in a MMORPG.

While the reasons the IRS has recently begun looking into taxing goods in MMORPGs vary, some say it is because there is so much money floating around in the games, while others believe it is to prevent in-game cybercrime, the matter still stands. What will happen to those of us who play these MMORPGs but are unable to afford the taxes of the items we obtain in the virtual world we frequent? What about the MMORPGs that are free of charge, i.e. Maple Story, RuneScape, Second Life, etc...? If the subscription numbers drop because people can no longer afford to play, what will happen to the social network created within these games? Uncle Sam needs to figure these things out before he takes a piece of the action.

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Some say it is because there is so much money floating around in the games, while others believe it is to prevent in-game cybercrime...

The Power of Social Bookmarking: A Valuable Tool for Technical Communicators

by Andrew Lundquist

Social bookmarking is a web service that allows users to save, organize, and share links to valuable resources on the web.

In recent years, the internet has been transforming rapidly, guided by grand visions that are changing how we create and share knowledge. Among the throng of emerging Web 2.0 applications, one tool is uniquely suited to serve the needs of technical communicators in a number of ways.

Social bookmarking is a web service that allows users to save, organize, and share links to valuable resources on the web. This technology offers a number of advantages for technical communicators performing primary or secondary research, working privately or in collaboration with others.

Always Available

Social bookmarking sites are online applications, meaning users can access their bookmarks from any computer at any time. It also means that any time a user encounters a valuable resource, it can be bookmarked instantly, regardless of which computer the user is at. Technical communicators can be highly mobile, and social bookmarking provides a centralized list of links that's always at the ready.

Easily Shared

Collaboration has long been an important aspect of the technical communicator's role. Social bookmarking sites allow groups of users to easily keep track of one another's bookmarks, and compile and share specific lists of resources in a variety of ways.

User-Vetted

Major internet search engines are already making use of data from popular social bookmarking sites to help provide more relevant search results. When searching for certain types of information, semantically-classified links that have been deemed valuable by a body of human users can sometimes prove more useful than traditional search engine results calculated algorithmically by a computer.

Better Organized

Technical communicators manage large amounts of information, often spanning a diverse range of topics. When it comes to keeping track of web resources, social bookmarking provides the organizational tools necessary to make relevant information easy to locate at any time. All social bookmarking sites promote "tagging", a flexible link classification system that extends the power of folders, is easy to maintain, and provides built-in cross referencing functionality. When a user bookmarks a site, they are given the opportunity to tag the link with terms relevant to its content. These resources can then be searched for, ranked, and sorted in a variety of ways based on the terms with which they've been tagged. In fact, the ease with which sites can be socially bookmarked and classified, then remain conveniently filed away until called upon via their tags, seems to encourage more frequent bookmarking overall. Over time, a social bookmarker develops a personally-validated body of research that will continue to grow and serve them over the years.

How to Begin

There are many social bookmarking options available today, each with their own unique focus. Some of the most popular sites include

- Del.icio.us
- Digg.com
- StumbleUpon.com
- Reddit.com

After experimenting with several different sites, I decided upon Netvouz.com, which provides a clean, simple interface that is extremely easy to use. Netvouz is also currently the only social bookmarking site that allows users to use both tags and folders for organizing their links. I find that different types of bookmarks lend themselves to different organizational structures, and with Netvouz, I can use a combination of methods.

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The Power of Social Bookmarking...

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Social bookmarking is an incredibly flexible system, so remember that whatever site you decide to go with, it will take some time to become comfortable with the new processes and conventions that you develop. Rest assured that it will pay off in the end, with a great library of quality links that you can rely on for your personal and professional information needs for years to come.

STC Academic Programs

One of the incorporating principles of the Society is to "guide and inform students and to aid colleges and universities in the establishment of curricula for training in the arts and sciences of technical communication." STC provides support to teachers and students of technical communication through programs, scholarships, grants and loans, annual conferences, and seminars. The Society also provides information about events and courses related to technical communication.

Please visit STC.org for further details on academic programs.



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The Minnesota State Mankato
STC Student Chapter welcomed
DAKTRONICS
to campus on November 29

Daktronics is a worldwide leader in
the designing and manufacturing
of electronic systems

For internships and employment
information, or to learn more
about the company, please visit

www.daktronics.com



Daktronics delegates stop for a photo with Dr. Tesdell.
Left to right: Frank Kurtenbach, Jessica Lee, Lee Tesdell,
Karen Weisbeck, Angela Hatton, and Andrew Robertson.



Andrew Robertson—Minnesota State Mankato alum and former STC student chapter President—speaks on behalf of Daktronics to students and faculty.

Microsoft Word Spell Checker: Does It Help or Hurt?

by Valerie Rolfes



Over the next 50 years, writers will not remember a time when Microsoft Word did not exist. For the next several decades, the use of MS Word's standard text editing features such as spell checker will be even more prominently mainstream than it is today. However, the mass commercialization of this product leads consumers to ask the question: are academic students using it correctly? What effect does MS Word have on a student's academic capabilities?

In a recent study of Minnesota State University, Mankato freshmen, 100 students were polled on the usage of MS Word spell checker. These students were surveyed to find out if they felt MS Word spell checker was an accurate tool of revision.

The surveyed students perceived their spelling skills to be either adequate or they were unaware of their spelling inadequacies. When asked about the reliability of MS Word's spell checker, the students most commonly responded that the spell checker was, for the most part, accurate. When asked about the effect of MS Word on their ability to spell, forty-four percent (44%) of students felt that spell checker had increased their spelling skills while only four percent (4%) felt that it had decreased their skill level. The remaining students felt that the use of MS Word's spell checker had not changed their spelling proficiency.

A survey administered to 20 instructors from the MSU English department that focused on the instructors' opinions on the use of MS Word spell checker, showed that a little less than half of the instructors believed that spell

checker often helps the students. Most of the instructors believed that MS Word spell checker has a positive influence only sometimes. These instructors pointed to students using spell checker ineffectively as a type of academic crutch. Some students rely heavily on spell checker and do not proofread their own work. Often, spell checker automatically replaces a word or changes the spelling to a similar yet incorrect word. Many students will believe that if MS Word does not catch their spelling errors, then their papers are free from mistakes. One of the most common responses from the instructors was that they felt students used spell checker as an end-all editing tool. Students simply accepted the changes that MS Word suggested. They moved forward in their revision process and did not question the corrections.

These results imply that students, though they feel MS Word spell checker is not a hindrance on their spelling proficiency, often rely on the revision tool instead of their own academic capabilities. This subsequently could lead to a break down in spelling proficiency if students constantly depend on MS Word to supply them with answers, instead of reasoning out the letters on their own. Also, if students are allowed to use MS Word earlier on in their academic careers, they might have a higher dependency on this tool. The use of MS Word may, one day, be banned from writing classrooms, as is the use of a calculator from math classrooms.



**STC's 55th Annual Conference will take place in
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 1-4, 2008.**

**For more information on the conference, visit stc.org or
contact either *Techniques* staff or one of our faculty advisors.**

BULLETIN BOARD

Would You Like to See Your Idea in TECHNIQUES ?

If you have an interesting story idea, or if you are interested in contributing to *Techniques*, please contact our editors or faculty advisors listed in the staff section on page two. We look forward to hearing about your idea!



Spring Semester Courses

English 271 (4 credits)
Technical Communication
7 sections (1 online)

English 4/571 (4 credits)
Visual Technical Communication
T H 2:00 – 3:45 pm Hurley

English 4/572 - 01 (4 credits)
**Topics in Technical Communication:
Project Management**
M W 1:00 – 2:45 pm Haas

English 4/572 - 02 (4 credits)
**Topics in Technical Communication:
Risk Management**
H (online) 7:00 – 8:30 pm MacKenzie

English 4/575 (4 credits)
Editing Technical Publications
W 6:00 – 9:45 pm Nord

English 4/577 (4 credits)
**Technical Documentation, Policies,
& Procedures**
M (online) 7:00 – 8:30 pm Tesdell

English 674 (3 credits)
**Topics in Technical Communication:
Instructional Design**
W (online) 7:00 – 8:30 pm Hurley

English 678 (3 credits)
Technical & Scientific Prose
T (online) 7:00 – 8:30 pm MacKenzie

English 679 (3 credits)
**Rhetorical Theory Applied to Technical
Documents**
M 6:00 – 8:45 pm Haas

Reminder!

The Minnesota State Mankato STC Student Chapter meetings will resume on Monday, February 4, at 5:00 pm. They will continue to be bi-weekly, and our meeting room is CSU 123.

FROM THE CO-ADVISOR'S DESK



As a soccer referee my charge is to maintain a fair match for 90 minutes between two teams of 11 players each. Those 22 players expect to be allowed to play the game to the best of their abilities, but need an arbiter in the middle to keep their play fair. I step into their game only when needed. If I step in too much by whistling trifling fouls, then I intrude on their game. If I don't blow the whistle at all, I am probably shirking my duty to keep the play fair.

As an instructor of technical communication and co-advisor to the student chapter of the Society of Technical Communication at Minnesota State University, Mankato, my job is similar in that I shepherd and facilitate but don't interfere with students' progress in the direction of realizing their potential in the field of technical communication. I am the keeper of the rules but I allow students to be creative; I step in when necessary with guidelines, knowledge of

the field, and connections to help them advance their careers.

With the current issue of *Techniques* online, technical communication students at Minnesota State Mankato chose their topics and have shown what they can do. They have once again written interesting pieces that pertain in some way to our discipline of technical communication.

We welcome you to our technical communication community as readers of *Techniques* and hope that you peruse the archives as well. In our courses at Minnesota State Mankato we offer students, current and prospective, the opportunity to learn to become technical communication professionals by reaching their potential under the guidance of the faculty at Minnesota State Mankato in either face-to-face or online learning environments.

— Lee S. Tesdell

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