English Department

Reflexive Essay
S & TC Practicum

Submitted By:

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Beginnings

Since I was young, I've always admired my late grandfather, a World War II veteran and code breaker extraordinaire. He started my interest in communication and its function in the world. His stories demonstrated yet another way writing can change the world. I also built a lot of models as a boy and got frustrated with the written instructions. "I could write this better," I would exclaim.

Early in my sophomore year in high school, I got to visit Bowling Green State University and spend the weekend at my cousin's dorm after researching BGSU extensively from home. I visited several sites and talked with various faculty. I knew this place was for me. Little did I know my plans for a computer science major would be changed halfway through my second semester as a freshman in 1991.

I was very excited to get a Bachelor's of Science degree in S&TC (December 1995) with cognates in business and an internship at Bell Engineering firm, located in Bryan, Ohio. After graduating I enjoyed the ups and down of eight years in the workplace and formed my own personal preferences and pedagogies including style of criticism (e.g. editing in pencil, not red ink).

I was able to boost my design and creative skills substantially through independent work that included my largest success, a proposal for Sports Kidz, a youth sports organization based in Los Angeles, which eventually produced a lucrative partnership. In my workplace experience as an employee, my ideas were not usually implemented just because of my position and the hierarchy in the organization. Since I began my own independent business called "Tall Writer", I have found an outlet for my suppressed talents. My workplace proposals consisted of a few statistical tables, graphics/icons/pictures or not even considered or discussed. My Sports Kidz proposal incorporated several visual elements and graphics (usually averaging at least one picture on each page). It was amazing to have my work later verified by the theories and discussions in my graduate classes.

I also learned how grammar and mechanical mistakes were perceived. Critical judgment got so extreme that one of my peers wouldn't even review a paper with only one visible, yet minor, error on it. I realized that the "holy grail of 100% accuracy (Pogue 1)" might be impossible at time, but I can't stop trying.

I was faced with new situations where I had to battle for my profession and, consequently, my reputation and well being. I can't control what other people think, but I can control my performance. I found that I needed a richer background and understanding beyond the concepts I was learning in my sociology courses plus they needed to be related to writing and communication.

Back to School

My graduate studies tested my life where, in the beginning, I was getting a lot of stress and time for little reward. I would scrutinize every detail and sink large amounts of time into projects, but get only fraction of what I gave. My personal motivations for learning changed when I began give myself tangible, yet inexpensive rewards for my efforts (e.g. taking a walk with my family, going to free film sneak preview and shows at the Gish Film Theater).

I was working for me and no one else, so I shifted my focus, which seemed selfish at first, but then I realized how others were focused and motivated. If I didn't get feedback from instructors, it began to feel it was more likely confirmation that they know what I'm doing instead of neglect.

Initially I wanted a teaching position, but eventually got an assistantship at The Center for Teaching Learning and Technology (CTLT), which became a great learning experience combine with extensive class work. I was proud to be the first S&TC student hired at CTLT. My work consisted of individual assistance/problem solving with BGSU faculty, staff and the local community (one assistance session with a Wood County judge was particularly rewarding). Eventually I even conducted technology seminars on Endnotes, a great precursor to my teaching in writing class with Dr. Blair. My procedure sheet for troubleshooting Endnotes became incorporated into each installation on BGSU computers. I was proud to see my promotion of Endnotes promoted and my documentation used for a large audience.

I created, Endnotes/CPS (Class Performance System) seminar outlines, PowerPoint & MS Word (tracking/editing methods) learning aids/documentation. I also proofread the Notes & News newsletter, distributed throughout the BGSU campus, and seminar documentation for a video segment.

The problem solving aspect was highest at CTLT. I had to learn the strengths and weaknesses of staff members so I could help the clients quickly and efficiently. Delegating tasks that I couldn't figure out was hard because I was used to having all the answers, but I learned how the technologically talented students knew more than I did and could be used as valuable resources in a team-oriented atmosphere promoting collaboration and honesty. CTLT was a great environment where I could be comfortable in sharing my mistakes and receiving constructive criticism to improve those weaknesses.

At my other assistantship in the S&TC program/Career Resource Facility, I completed research work that deal with the relationship of Technical Communication Programs to

Rhetoric and Composition Programs and the disciplines themselves, which gave me a greater understanding of the department's role in my learning process.

"As soon as a style becomes universally supported, the need to separate it from content disappears (Stein 3)". The most challenging and personal was writing a style sheet for my family genealogy book. I learned how layout, design and style fulfilled Stein's point and how clear, concise style sheets eliminate ambiguity in editing.

In my training class, I helped develop my first formal training plan using my information design skills complements by my co-authors' expertise in business. "You can't teach people skills, so we also pay close attention to how a person handles themselves and interacts with others (Wells)." We used Gagne's Events of Instruction to summarize this interaction. They were very useful and applicable to many of my classes.

In the training class, we discussed in detail the assessment and retention aspects in the nine points of Gagne's Events of Instruction. The discussions and classes reinforced those points and made me realize even more how my role as a technical writer in the instruction/training process becomes very important. I have been involved in training modules before and have a created a few training plans in my portfolio. I think the experience of applying these plans to people and the feedback was incredibly helpful.

Theories were explained very well and examples were incredibly helpful. My wife got her degree in psychology and we have frequently talked about how my class theories related to cognitive and behavioral approaches. I even jotted down notes where these theories could apply to other related projects and classes (including my teaching writing class, which was later incorporated into my teaching philosophy).

Real World Window

My internship experience was very collaborative and flexible allowing me to have multiple clients and environments. This experience complimented my undergraduate internship at Bell Engineering in Bryan, Ohio because it advanced me to an environment that reflects what I want to accomplish eventually – managing an independent writing/communications company.

What-a-Ride Limousine Services, L.L.C., Howard Sherling, manager

My work for What a Ride, based in Pemberville, Ohio, began in August 2003 and ended, temporarily in the 2004 summer (though I did more work over that Christmas break). I revised/added documentation to existing materials such as information sheets, computer/technology consulting and instructions. The comprehensive brochure I produced had to encapsulate the business operations while persuading potential/existing customers to use our services. We did have some issues about listing the prices in the brochure. I thought it was better to keep this information away from competitors, but Howard believed that information would get more customers because it was the most vital piece of information contained in the brochure. I learned a lot from Howard about

operating an independent business and was able to utilize my comprehensive public relations talents on several occasions, mostly in face-to-face contacts/meetings.

I also got some great digital photography experience which produces great pictures for the brochure. We also scanned in some existing photographs Howard took himself. Overall the brochure had a great visual feel to it and became a valuable interactive piece, especially at trade shows. After the brochure was produced, I helped Howard create a target list of key customers and potential clients.

I got to know the business even more when I facilitated a What-a-Ride booth at the Bowling Green wedding show in February 2004. I handled bookings, confirmation and monetary deposits – a great experience that complimented my business experience. I incorporated as many details as possible from prospective clients at the wedding show into the communication and documentation I produced this summer, so my manager, Howard Shirling, could accurately provide services to clients. I also prepared/revised documentation for pricing agreements/service contracts. I also formatted an information sheet of price guides (type of event, minimum hours required, vehicle required, approximate length of time), related documentation, customer databases and a program for driver training – a great opportunity to utilize the skills I learned in last semester's training class.

Creative Minds (January 2004-end), Carol Dean, manager

Creative Minds, an educational supply store based in Bryan, Ohio, offered customer service/ordering by phone, person, mail and Web.

Toledo.com – "A community portal Web site covering entertainment, business and community in the Toledo, Ohio area"

At *Toledo.com* I completed several articles about local events/organizations (Toledo Metro Parks systems, etc.) and related Website writing for manager Ian Hartten since January 2004. Online writing was a new area for me and I got some valuable experience. My article for the Metro parks allowed me to collaborate with my previously existing community public relations contacts to shape the story. I coordinated with Metro parks communications manager, Scott Carpenter, to get essential information (land area, public access, attendance statistics, etc.) and graphics to incorporate with the documentation.

My journalistic experience was greatly utilized here, but my research methods and techniques helped me create a complete picture of the Metro parks. I had a better understanding of my responsibility to describe *every* element in the article and find the resources to do it with instead of depending on my contact for all the research/information (something I see happen in the journalism field a lot). This project gave me great personal accountability while learning to write in a new medium.

By Fall 2004, I had added La Revancha, local Bowling Green music band lead by Leonardo Ruiz (my Spanish was useful here), in the multi client internship for my public

relations/communication/documentation services (my status as music columnist for the Sentinel-Tribune was particularly helpful here).

Performing Potential

I realized how my organizational skills could be applied to several performance theories and ideals, which would not only improve me individually, but collectively as a collaborative team member. "It's critical to understand that consistent performance is a function of all variables, not five out of six (Rummler 46)." A high rate of Rummler's six factors - performance specifications, task interference, consequences, feedback, knowledge/skill and individual capacity (46) would ensure a higher individual performance.

I also considered other ideas, mainly presented in my training class, like the following:

> *"If capable, well-trained people are placed in a setting with clear expectations, minimal task interference, reinforcing consequences, and appropriate feedback, then they will be motivated…*The basics of performance management its planning, assessment, and rewards processes can give an organization leverage on what affects a performer's level of motivation (Wade & Parent)."

When completing a class interview assignment, I asked Carl Detmer (Project Development & Account Specialist, Professional and Community Education/PACE and Continuing & Extended Education at BGSU) how he measured tasks, he replied:

> "We assess responsibilities based on our needs and daily operations to the talents a Web Designer has. We specify some components to designated Web designers, but most tasks are not measured or tracked in great detail because of limited time we have to devote to them, but we also add necessary details as we progress…We get requests for training from Technology Support Center (372-0999). Training beyond them typically is bumped up to me. I'll talk to the company (or BGSU staff) trainer or person handling the training on the phone or on site. I ask the trainer to describe their needs and focus topics, and then analyze that. I take notes from discussions with the people needing the training then share them with the trainer. Say someone has a basic knowledge of Dream weaver, but they need to create tables, etc. We begin to formulate a program together and I pick the appropriate modules from about 20 topics that we use. Approval comes back to me and we plan and execute the training event (Detmer)."

Sure the process had benefited from years of experience, but the organization of the performance needs amazed me. Again, I realized how important analysis skills were becoming in my studies. The following quote I read doing research for my online documentation class echoes yet another important point of analysis:

> "What I think working web designers need is visibility into the technology they're trying to use and into the experience they're creating for their users. Combine that

with a thorough grasp of mission, and an inclination to complete the job, and they'll decide wisely what needs to go where…I don't think anyone is served by oversimplifying it (Stein)."

My portfolio classes taught me to "sacrifice personal time to create an awe-inspiring layout (Schumacher)." Well, I sacrificed a lot of time to create my best resume yet and the foundation for my future Tall Writer Website. Style and layout were presented in creative way, which really helped boost my design skills.

I also revisited search engine submissions for my Website, which was prompted by a class report where my former colleague stated "You need to have enough information throughout your web site that pertains to your site so that it will be picked up on search engines. This information includes the tags, description and source code (Boucher)."

I was able to realize the negative aspects of "personal pages" in the following reading:

> "Personal pages are not necessarily "bad," but you need to investigate the author very carefully. For personal pages, there is no publisher or domain owner vouching for the information in the page (Barker & Obromsook)."

I understood the responsibility I had for a potentially large audience, which helped form the Website into a more, professional and usable design.

My grant writing class was vital to be an effective team member of the Digital Literacy and Communication Studio, especially during "house call" sessions, team meetings and seminars. My research methods continue to help my ongoing quest to find grants and make valuable contributions to the organization.

Teaching Myself

In my teaching experience, I learned to build-up a student's capacity to participate in decision-making in work and life in general. When grading papers I think of the roles played by writers and technical communicators. I analyzed attempts to exercise their influence or power, while the concept of that power is being constantly negotiated by the writer and society at large.

Credibility was a major issue, especially after I read this question - Does the writer sound intelligence and knowledgeable (Glenn, Goldthwaite and Connors 154)? Who defines what's credible, intelligent and knowledgeable – our society, co-workers and peers. At some point the writer must persuade but there's also articulation, transformation and even translating to achieve full authorship of their writing. The level of writer involvement depends on the scope of their environment. A worker in a technical writing firm may not have to persuade as much as a single writer in a large engineering firm.

Without guidance, independent writing is completed with no sense of others' positions. People make their own decisions and chart their own development. You produce how

you're useful as a writer, but don't know if that matches with the upper hierarchy, namely your audience or (gulp) your boss. Students don't learn that they have a right to speak up and speak out for their profession. They buckle under the "just tell me what you want" motto and "abandon their own personal investment" (Glenn, Goldthwaite and Connors 385) instead of building and refining their own processes.

A writer can have the confidence to stick with no matter what, but without proper guidance and knowledge to support that confidence, the writer's credibility can crumble among peers.

With guidance, evaluation and response, the teacher becomes "the gatekeeper of discourse and opportunity", which can allow the writer to succeed in his/her profession, fulfill his/her expectation(s) and move forward. Students have to give credit to the teacher who has special training and experience in writing and communications.

Students can't achieve authorship without some grade or gauge administered through teacher guidance and peer reviews. Self evaluations where the student comments on their own progress throughout the class should always accompany teacher evaluations! It would be ideal if students could have the chance to make constructive comments regarding teacher evaluations throughout the semester in a special notepad or even looking at the other evaluations anonymously so they're more objective (not enough time to finish the evaluation and really reflect on the entire experience), but that's probably not realistic in most cases because the class dynamics muddle the issue.

I also like the following ideas demonstrated in my classes:

- Students list their own perceived grade for the first project and then the entire semester (TECH 633)
- Conferences should not be last attempts to sway the grade (ENG 620)
- Progress reports written by the students themselves (Glenn, Goldthwaite and Connors 391)

The methods of "treating improvement" and "degree of difficulty" (Glenn, Goldthwaite and Connors 136) stress the process while accounting for the necessity of grades. Grades can't be totally objective. High school basketball coaches mistakenly judged Michael Jordan as an unworthy basketball player by cutting him from the team. Students should never define themselves with those assessments/grades and continue to learn through processes. It's a battle against society. What will students tell family members when they ask us how college is? Grades are usually the first thing then we might remember the terminal comments or criteria we did or didn't meet.

Local Benefit

During the semester, we've considered important visual communication elements like audience, focus and delivery method to help users realize what CASO can do for them. We've reviewed a wide range of materials then synthesized that communication to create

pieces that build CASO prominence in the community and create social interaction with a wide audience. We strived to make users view CASO as a valuable conduit/resource while respecting the seriousness, challenges and boundaries of sexual assault. The face-to-face meetings with our client reinforced the learning theories and practices.

Watched several presentations which explained several sociological and psychological factors behind how offenders often dehumanize sex – calling victims derogatory names, creating fantasies instead of seeing victims as real people with families and friends who love them, etc.). We also learned the benefits and dangers of various communication methods related to CASO. For example, the group presentations became a great way to engage audience through face to face contact and allowed CASO to have more control in directing the experience, but we saw how audiences' personal feelings can effect the experience as well. The knowledge we received was visualized through our communication and documentation which was created so users can make decisions that are sensitive to a client's needs.

I also didn't have the theoretical background and persuade/argue points effectively when my profession (technical writing) was challenged and even ridiculed. For example, I was able to constructively explain to the tech group why we can't change content just because it didn't "sound right" in one situation. A writing style guide (e.g. Chicago, APA) had to be referenced before making editing changes. My experience with writing guides blended well into the on-line content style of our main project. I've always been able to provide, organize and synthesize quality content, but this class increased my ability to incorporate visual communication into my communication while considering the context and experience the discourse among project team members. The discourse/feedback from the instructor and students helped me put my work in a better perspective and helped me concentrate more on my biggest weakness – design.

My wife worked for the local SAAFE (Sexual Assault Advocacy For Empowerment) program and got her degrees in psychology and so we frequently discussed the cognitive and behavioral approaches. I even jotted down notes where these theories could apply to other related projects and classes that I was involved including the "edutainment" research and discussions we produced that reflected on the class notes on shaping reality and video games including flight simulators. That information gave me great direction for the CASO Quiz Show game research where I found 36 learning principles from the book "What Video Games Can Teach Us" by Mark Woolf.

The print campaign might include a comprehensive/core advertisement piece, like a poster and a consolidation/revision of the existing brochures. Use the BG News, BGSU Marketing & Communications and other local public relations groups in the community to create collaborations and face-to-face meetings with new and existing network partners (e.g. get existing partners to increase their involvement by adding the CASO logo to their related print materials). Feedback should also be sought from all new and existing CASO contacts while expanding public relations efforts to incoming BGSU freshman, campus police personnel, local churches, managers, HR departments, local civic organizations

and local community cable channel (Time Warner) and various non-profit resources for additional exposure/collaboration.

Theory Makes Perfect

"When one knows this theory in an area, one has a foundation for evaluating choices. (MacNealy 45)."

I began to concentrate more on my "non-writing" learning experience while processing theories and applying them to practical use. Eventually I learned to create communication channels between two concepts:

1. How people see and/or experience
2. How people understand what they see and/or experience

These processes required detailed analysis to better match audience with the writing, then create communication in a documentation design that's easily understood. I used this process the most during the production of the operations manual for Creative Minds educational supply store. I experienced the audience, research, focus, design and delivery method on a level I'd never experienced before. It was great to see personal results from personal work/research.

When reflecting on my work experience, I could identify with a classbook quote that "no job has a single tool (MacNeely 45)." We've always presented many tools to clients, but it's important to see, p45 – how a community of users interact with these tools. At work, most tool interaction was done behind closed doors, which perpetuated typical social habits in business such as overemphasizing concepts, posturing and manipulation. The staff usually understood how their knowledge construction would benefit the client, but couldn't communicate it well.

I quickly learned that spell and grammar checks on the computer was the perceived way to survive in the documentation workplace, but after reading these two works I dug deeper and realized that maybe my peers concentrated on the grammar and language because they had certain expectations of me as a writer. I never asked them directly, but they might have thought my job was to fix spelling errors, etc. and if I couldn't do that, they concluded my work was not good. I didn't realize until now that doing what came natural to me was actually risking my livelihood in the professional fields because of the perception of my peers, which I can't always control.

I knew technical writing was needed, but had to increase my persuasive skills internally to convince high management that it was needed. In my graduate studies, I realized how deadlines, pressure and expectation shaped the writing. I also realized how the concentration on the spell checks were related to their frequent use of ready made templates of proposals, manuals, etc. on their computers.

My classes prompted deeper personal questions like what's more important to society overall, my personal knowledge or my work? I also accounted for the difference in audience, location, tone and level of information needed and considered other areas influenced by technical writing influence.

Most people give me an odd look when I say that I'm a technical writer. It's intangible to the layperson that hears the word "writer" and thinks spelling, etc. I feel the communication a technical writer achieves between different areas is largely ignored. People are expected to communicate accurately even if the controlling hierarchy doesn't understand the process. In graduate school, I realized how important this responsibility is.

Another Beginning

I believe the heart of scientific and technical communication is when people understand what they are doing. I plan to continue the detailed process of drafting, editing, revision and dissemination. During my two-year experience in the program - classes, assistantship and internship, my work ethic has not changed, but my analytical, design and articulation skills increased.

My valuable internship experience created several benefits on different levels. I received new client contacts and has able to support my family through related work and services, which made the work very personal and rewarding. I continue to interact with these contacts, which has even created corollary opportunities for further education.

The skills and education received throughout my S&TC internships allow me to assess my own skills/weaknesses; succeed in group and individual situations and create an ideal work place discourse where my passions equal my talents. I eventually want to speak as well as I write and carefully analyze elements before making important decisions.

I learned not to 'do all myself', made gains in reasoning and functioned well within time limits, worked independently using self imposed expectations that usually aligned with class instructors.

I continued my use of voice recognition technology, which began in 2002 and also discovered Endnotes, a bibliography program that was very useful. I learn to push deadlines when work was overwhelming –a steady, marathon-like pace seems to work best.

I've come to understand that communication/documentation is used to bridge gap between client and user. Written work is fine, but people learn visually (more people learn that way), then I feel it has more impact – to make the user a "proficient" user for the highest possible understanding of the presented communication/documentation –to see technical writing/communication beyond just punctuation, but more as a process.

I appreciate a richer background and understanding beyond the workplace concepts I was learning. I write because it's natural and comfortable for me, but also because I provide

that communication bridge between the client and user of the given product/service. My heartfelt thanks and appreciate to everyone involved.

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