Interview and Corpus Analysis on Technical Communication

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TECM 5191

18 September 2015

Technical communicators have to know different types of digital literacies because technical communication is a profession that is always changing as technology is evolving. To learn more about the various digital literacies of a technical communicator, I interviewed three technical communicators, Ugur Akinci, Arnold Burian, and Larry Kunz. I asked them six questions that helped me learn more about the real skills that are needed to become a successful technical communicator and the different roles they have. Also, I examined the class corpus analysis of technical communication job ads from my digital literacies course using the AntConc software to find what are the most frequently used keywords and phrases for job titles, job descriptions, and required skills in technical communication.

**Method:**

For the interview part of the project, I emailed seven technical communicators, but only three accepted to be interviewed by email. I asked them six questions which were:

1. What are the tools you use the most in your career?

2. What is your definition of digital literacy and how does it relate to your job?

3. What is the most important technical skill that you posses?

4. How valuable is being able to teach yourself new technical skills?

5. How has digital literacy changed the profession of technical communication?

6. Why is writing an important skill to have as a technical communicator? How do you use writing in your job?

The first person I interviewed was Ugur Akinci. First, I started following him on Twitter on August 24 and I got his email from his [Technical Communication Center](http://www.technicalcommunicationcenter.com/) website. Akinci is **a**, Fortune 100 senior technical communicator, trainer, public speaker, and information designer. Next, Arnold Burian was the second person I interviewed through email. Also, I started following him on Twitter on August 24 and I got his email from his <https://about.me/arnoldburian> website. Burian is a technical writer and project manager with more than 10 years experience. Furthermore, the last person I interviewed was Larry Kunz who has more than 30 years experience as a technical writer, manager, planner, and information designer. Moreover, I started following him on Twitter on August 24, but I got his email from the techcommspeakersbureau.org website.

To examine the class corpus of technical communication job ads from my digital literacies course, I had to upload the file to the AntConc software which is a tool that is a corpus analysis toolkit designed for specific use in the classroom to find the answers to these questions:

1. What are the most frequently used keywords and phrases for job titles in the corpus?
2. What are the most frequently used keywords and phrases for job descriptions?
3. What are the most frequently used keywords and phrases for required skills?

**Interview Results:**

Foremost, the tools that Akinci uses the most in his job are Adobe FrameMaker, Adobe Robohelp, Adobe Captivate, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Presenter, MS Word, MS Excel, MS PowerPoint, Agile, and Atlassian JIRA. Next, Burian uses tools like Adobe FrameMaker, Adobe RoboHelp, Madcap Flare, Microsoft Office, Microsoft SharePoint, Adobe Creative Suite, and TechSmith Snagit based on the needs of his role since he spent the first ten years of his career as a technical writer and the last ten in managerial positions for various organizations. Furthermore, the tools Kunz uses at the moment are oXygen XML editor, the DITA Open Toolkit, Adobe Acrobat, SnagIt, and Microsoft Office.

Many technical communicators have their own definition of digital literacy based on their experiences in the profession. For instance, Akinci defines digital literacy as “having the basic skills to use a computer, smart phone, email, have social media accounts and platforms, login to Internet accounts every day and post blogs, comments, etc. on a daily basis.” While Burian describes that his favorite definition of digital literacy comes from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: “Digital literacy is the ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information. In technical communication, information has not always been digital. But as technical communicators, we have always needed to be able to discover, aggregate, and use information in a way that extends beyond the value of the information itself. It has always been useful to describe the functionality of a widget, but much more impactful to translate the value of the widget to realize a business opportunity or resolve a challenge. Meaningful content can provide context, and we live in a society where expectations from users are much higher. Almost everyone nowadays asks *So what?* We will be much more effective if we can answer that question using all the tools available to us.” Most of all, Kunz believes that digital literacy is “being able to use computing technology to improve the quality of one's work. It relates to my job in a variety of ways -- from faster turnaround as a

content creator, to better tracking and reporting as a project manager, to more effectively using social media to build my personal brand.”

The results to the third question were interesting and contradictory. For example, Akinci believes that the most important technical skill that he possesses is his expertise of Adobe FrameMaker and RoboHelp. Subsequently, Burian state’s that he does not know if he has one specific technical skill that he values the most, then others. However, he says that “there are two traits that have helped me tremendously: having a sense of curiosity and being fearless. Both of these have helped me as I approach a new product, application, or service. How does this work? How should it work? What can people do with this? How can I help someone derive value from this in the fastest way possible? What happens when I try to use it incorrectly or in a different way than intended? Having the desire and ability to understand the why will make it much easier for you to describe the how.” Foremost, Kunz believes that the ability to learn new tools by making inferences based on tools he’s seen before is his most valuable technical skill that he possesses.

The interviewee responses I got from the fourth question were also different due to their own experiences they’ve had in the technical communication profession. Moreover, Akinci explains that the ability to teach himself new skills is valuable to him, since his company does not provide any formal company-paid training opportunities. However, his company still expects him to keep himself updated with “technical innovations, teach myself new software, and come up with new documentation ideas.” Still, Akinci believes that he is a pretty good self-learner and self-motivator who likes to learn new technical skills. Meanwhile, Burian believes that the value of being able to teach yourself new technical skills “depends on the complexity of the system you are trying to document; a specific type of training or technical ability relevant to that technology will likely make it easier for you accomplish your tasks.”He also explains that to train for a new technical skill, you have to be “willing to submerge yourself in whatever you are trying to understand. Much of this is attitude and a willingness to keep an open mind and make mistakes as you embark on your journey to create resources and materials that will help others who do not have a similar ability or time.” For example, Kunz believes that being able to teach himself new technical skills is valuable to him because whenever he takes on any project, he knows that he will learn a new technical skill to complete the project. Though, Kunz knows that he should not rely on only teaching himself new technical skills because taking training and mentoring courses are important too.

Digital literacy has changed the nature of technical communicators work as it evolved and the interviewees had different views on that due to the past jobs they had and where they are in their career now. Specifically, Akinci believes that digital literacy progressed a lot because when he first started out, he could “write a 5-page user guide with MS Word, print it on a dot-matrix office printer and market yourself as a "technical writer." This was 20 years ago. Nowadays you need to be able to use "software suites", learn new software-hardware systems rapidly, learn "single sourcing" and "structured authoring," know how to generate not only documents but also learning modules and "gamified" versions of legacy documents, be savvy of social media, participate in multiple forums and platforms, and be active in professional circles (like STC - Society for Technical Communication). This is the age of multiple hats and multi-tasking, 24-7.” On the other hand, Burian thinks the way digital literacy has changed how technical communicators gather information and how they produce content is positive because this has made their field much more exciting and even more relevant. The progression of digital literacy also equips technical communicators for success and empowers them to provide the right information at the right time to the right audience. Likewise, Kunz believes that how the growth of digital literacy has changed the way technical communicators has made them better at what they do, because now they can respond better to their customers' requirements and has helped them gain prestige with other professionals like subject-matter experts and project managers. Although, Kunz believes that technical communicators still have a long way to go in the area of proving their value.

For the last question, all of the interviewees agreed that writing is still the most important skill to have as a technical communicator because they still have to communicate information to their audience in a clear and precise manner. For instance, Akinci states:

Take any web page and wipe away the text and see what remains and if it makes any sense at all. Despite all the hoopla about "multimedia," simple, correct and understandable text is still the backbone of all technical communication. Even though I love images and videos, infographics and other forms of visual communication, text is still the backbone of all tech communication and will remain so. Writing simple but correct instructions within as few pages as possible and creating "Plain English" instructions is a challenge that I love and try to get better at every day.

In addition, Burian still believes that writing is the most foundational aspect of being a technical communicator. Even though, he knows that technical communicators tend to focus more on how they create, package, and distribute content. Furthermore, he understands that tools, methods, and processes change and evolve over time, but he also agrees that great, understandable, and concise writing is timeless. Above all, since Burian is a technical writer and project manager with more than 10 years experience, writing skills is the first thing he looks at when hiring a technical communicator. Most of all, Kunz thinks writing is an important skill for technical communicators to have because their main job is to communicate, and their most effective means of communicating is still the written word, but he also says that writing will “someday might be eclipsed by video or graphic design. But I reckon I'll be long gone by then.” Finally, he uses writing every day in every aspect of his job, from creating content for customers and prospective customers, to formulating proposals, to communicating internally with his colleagues.

**Corpus Analysis Results:**

When I opened the TECM 5191 class corpus file and processed it on the AntConc software, the most frequently used keywords and phrases for job titles on the corpus were technical writers, technical specialist or technical analyst, technical writer/editor, project manager, etc. Next, the most frequently used keywords and phrases used for the job descriptions of technical communicators was writer, editor, designer, etc. Finally the most frequently used keywords and phrases for required skills of a technical communicator was “experience” which had 719 hits. Another keyword that was frequently used for required skills was “ability” which had 315 hits. Finally, other frequently used keywords for required skills was “writing” which had 299 hits, “education” which had 139 hits, “technology” which had 106 hits, and “editing” which had 102 hits.

**Discussion:**

Although, Akinci, Burian, and Kunz use tools like Adobe FrameMaker, Adobe Robohelp, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Presenter, MS Word, MS Excel, MS PowerPoint, etc in their technical communication profession, they still think that technical communicators willing to learn different tools quickly on the job is more important than trying to learn all of the tools at once because new tools are always being created. In Saul Carliner’s article, *Computers and Technical Communication in the 21st Century*, the author explains how the evolution of computers changed the way the technical communicators produced their work. Furthermore, the interviewees seem to agree with Carliner’s article on how technology changed technical communication jobs and job titles in the computer industry because as technology progressed, technical communicators were no longer seen as just writers, editors, and illustrators. As a result, technical communicators had to learn how to create software and databases on computers to work for computer industries. Furthermore, I was surprised that the three technical communicators I interviewed believed that writing is still the most important skill to have because most job ads ask for tools and software experience. Jan H. Spyridakis’ article, *Identifying New Topics in TC Curricula: Preparing Students for Success in a Changing World* explains that technical communicators should learn more project management skills because they have to take on new roles since technical communication is always changing due to technology and the different facilities are they surrounded by like business, engineering, computer science, etc. Likewise, one of the most regularly used keywords and phrases for job titles on the corpus analysis was project manager. Finally, I believe that Technical Communication undergraduate programs should interview more technical communicators instead of looking at job ads because they have real work experience and they know what skills future technical communicators need to succeed in the growing profession of technical communication since they will have different job roles.

Works Cited

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