Graphic Communication in Tech Comm

Seth Anderson

Course Proposal

4180.005

As technical communicators, it is our job to make information both useful and usable. This often comes in the form of making technical data readable to a layman, or steps to complicated processes easy to follow for a consumer. Unfortunately, something that is oftentimes lost in this process is the importance of quality aesthetic design. To help avoid this in the future, the UNT Technical Communication department of the College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences should offer an advanced class that focuses not only on the teaching of proper visual design principles, but also on providing students with the necessary experience using the tools involved with the practice, such as Adobe Photoshop and InDesign. Through providing this course, you would be equipping students with another skill to help broaden their professional horizons, allowing them to more effectively fulfill their roles as communicators in the business world. This is in keeping with the College's stated vision of "increasing interdisciplinary collaboration" that "opens up new opportunities for intellectual, empirical, and [most of all] creative discovery."

Of course, the Technical Communication program already provides students with a wide variety of subjects and specialties to choose from beyond its core courses. Courses like Information Design for Electronic Media provide students with an avenue into coding HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and the like for website and mobile application development, while Content Strategy and Social Media in Technical Communication allows students to explore the relationships people have with technical communication and just how indispensable good technical communicating is to websites like Facebook and Twitter. The Technical Communication department can now further push this variety by taking a closer look at the role graphic communication has in our work. It can do this by offering a course with the following features:

- **Course Name:** Graphic Communication within Technical Communication
- **Catalog Description:** Advanced class that offers students an in-depth study of the foundations of design as well as hands-on experience with current tools utilized in the graphic communication industry. Students will also explore the relationship between visual arts and technical writing, and how that relationship can be used by technical communicators.
- **Location:** UNT primary Denton campus, likely on the third floor of the Auditorium building, thus continuing to keep Technical Communication classes centrally located.

- **Course Level:** 3000

- **Learning Outcomes**: Upon completion of course, students will be able to competently utilize visual design principles and demonstrate technical skill in programs such as Adobe Photoshop and InDesign to create effective visual deliverables in genres ranging from icons to posters. Additionally, they will be able to better communicate with dedicated graphic designers and visual artists within development teams.

- **Prerequisite:** TECM 3100 – Commercial Publications for High-Tech Industries

While UNT has a very prestigious Communication Design program within the College of Visual Arts & Design (CVAD), its courses are not available to those not participating in the program. Additionally, the courses offered go in-depth beyond the needs of a technical communicator. As a student who originally arrived at UNT with the intention of pursuing a career in Communication Design, I understand the importance of this knowledge-building, but know from experience the disillusionment that can come with the lack of hands-on training the Communication Design program offers early on in its curriculum. This is, in fact, the primary reason I left the program, and why I was drawn in by the more practical methodology that drives technical communication. Luckily the aptitude of the professors in the CVAD means there is already a healthy pool of potential instructors of Graphic Communication within Technical Communication available at UNT.

Furthermore, communication design *is* technical communication, or at least a part of it. Like user experience design and document layout design, graphic design is a part of technical communication that utilizes the creativity that makes us more than just glorified copy editors. "Graphic design has been a part of the study of technical communication since its beginnings in the 1950s" states the entry for "Graphic Designer" on the Technical Communication Body of Knowledge's website (Preeti, 2017). And it will always be more efficient cost- and time-wise for a technical writer to design the documents he or she has written than to pull in another entity for something as simple as the layout for a brochure.

However, there remain many distinctions between the technical communicator and the graphic communicator. While both focus on the creation and ideation of tangible, practical deliverables, generally to be used in an industry setting, the thought process and values behind these operations vary. Indeed, Dan Goldstein,

an author for *Tech Writer Today Magazine* and fellow technical writer, posits that there exists "an imaginary wall between technical writing and graphics" (Goldstein, 2014). This "wall" is actually made up of both "soft walls" and "firm walls" that correspond to the difficulty it takes one to master the skills that make each side of the wall what they are. For example, the difficulty it takes one to simply purchase some visual design software like Photoshop and develop a basic understanding of its functions via online tutorials, etc. would be described as a soft wall, as just about anyone can do as much. Similarly, more advanced software that requires significantly more time to begin to use effectively, such as CAD, would be classified as a firm wall (Goldstein, 2014). The object of this proposed course is to break down as much of this imaginary wall as possible.

Now, the College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences does offer a course similar to the one I've proposed, Commercial Publications for High-Tech Industries, but it best serves as an introduction to the idea of designing documents, and merely acquaints students with the relevant software. It does not teach enough about the relationship technical communicators may have with graphic communicators on development teams, nor does it provide students with the incentive to properly explore and understand the capabilities of the aforementioned software. Still, this introduction is useful, and would function well as a prerequisite to Graphic Communication within Technical Communication.

The Technical Communication program at UNT has the opportunity to help bridge the gap between technical communicators and others in an industry world that is becoming ever-more collaborative and cost-efficient. By utilizing the resources and expertise already present on our campus, you can continue to provide students with ability to cultivate the "skills most needed by… productive members of the global workforce."

References

Goldstein, D. (2014). Drawing a Wall: Where "Technical Communication" Ends and Graphic Design Begins.

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