**To:** Drs. Whittemore, Youngblood, Sidler

**From:** Akshata Balghare

**Re:** Portfolio Summary for Masters in Technical and Professional Communication

**Date:** 30 March 2018

**­­­­­\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Keywords - Theory/research: usability and accessibility, application: editing, application: document design

**Context**

Today, I find myself at an enriching intersection of engineering, liberal arts, and communications. I graduated in the top tenth percentile of my class as an electronics engineer from India. During campus recruitment, owing to my outstanding candidature and excellent communication skills, a global scientific editing company—Cactus Communications—extended me an offer to work as an associate editor. I edited and enhanced the readability of domestic and international research papers, user manuals, and industrial reports. Gradually, I realized my passion for scientific and technical communication and that I could aptly use my communication proficiency, attention to details, and desire to learn in editing and delivering enhanced technical data. This was my driving force to pursue a master’s degree in technical and professional communication at Auburn University.

The Fall of 2016 brought me into a different world altogether. I was new to the United States and relatively new to the field of technical communication. I remember that I randomly registered for the course ENGL 7040 Composition Issues and Approaches, which is now the most important part of my career. I barely understood what the course was about, and today I am an instructor for an undergrad-level English composition course. Moreover, teaching this course made me realize the importance of college-level writing courses and that because students from outside the United States are bereft of such courses they are often criticized for their writing skills. Teaching has now become my career focus, and it influenced me to apply for a PhD. My chief research interest as I begin working on a PhD will be exploring various approaches for teaching English composition to non-native speakers in the United States. Through this I want to teach technical writing, particularly, writing academic papers, reports, essays etc., to non-native speakers because as an English composition instructor and a non-native English speaker myself, I have observed how writing is practiced and pursued in an English-speaking country, and to be able to thrive in such a country it is essential that non-native speakers receive appropriate writing instruction.

In the past year and a half, I have noticed that in most of my class discussions and assignments, I have chosen to look at issues in technical communication from the perspective of an international citizen. This contributed new insights to the class discussions, and I have been able to offer my peers some insight into what these issues look like on other side of the world. I have also discovered that little research has been conducted exploring the importance of including international perspectives in issues involving technical communication because the field is too preoccupied with domestic issues and concerns pertaining to the United States. Thrush is a notable exception here because of her interests in exploring international and intercultural issues in professional communication. In her 1997 article, she gives an example of a situation where documents of agreement need to be created for signing treaties between countries. To be able to develop such documents, Thrush suggests that technical communicators need a framework for looking at cultures such that it will help them make reasonable hypotheses about how members of the culture will communicate and how they will receive and interpret attempts at communication. My being an outsider in this country has acclimated my mind to think from the perspective of a larger audience and to look at cultural nuances, thus allowing me to bring in an international focus to the field. As a result, my socio-cultural background and empirical knowledge make me well suited to be a technical communicator for a team that needs an outsider’s perspective.

During a recent event at Auburn University, Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, talked about diversity and inclusion. According to Cook,

We believe you can only create a great product with a diverse team. And I’m talking about the large definition of diversity. One of the reasons Apple products work really great—I hope you think they work really great—is that the people working on them are not only engineers and computer scientists, but artists and musicians. It’s this intersection of the liberal arts and humanities with technology that makes products that are magical (quoted in Williams).

This multidisciplinary approach conveys that someone who has a background and focus only in engineering would likely be unable to think outside the box or to achieve insights that a professional with multiple disciplinary or cultural backgrounds would see. Here, a parallel can be drawn to Thrush’s point about a technical communicator belonging to a particular socio-cultural background who does not possess the framework to see things from a global perspective. Thus, technical communicators need to expand perspectives in order to contribute fully to the global strategic management of their companies. Understanding global audiences requires exposure to and understanding of different cultures.

According to Amant (2001), culture is the embodiment of particular worldviews involving basic ideas of right and wrong. For this reason, what is considered acceptable and expected professional behavior in one culture might be unethical or even illegal in another (p. 387). My experiences in different cultures have taught me this firsthand. For instance, I am reminded of an advertisement infographic that I saw at the airport when I first arrived in the United States. The infographic compared Southwest Airlines with three other airlines, thus displaying how Southwest was better. I was shocked to see such an advertisement because in India it is illegal to advertise a product by defaming and specifically mentioning other companies, and it was then that I was first struck by how much the law can impact even the most mundane communication practices. Thus, Amant (2001) rightly says that when designing documentation for or when communicating with those from a different culture, technical communicators must remember that what is considered “good” or “effective” communication is not fixed. Rather, it varies from culture to culture. In fact, what is considered “good” writing or “effective” documentation could be quite different depending on cultural communication expectations (p. 366). This can be again related to Thrush’s point that a framework is needed for technical communicators to ensure that they always conduct research about cultural expectations or legal communication practices before working on such documentation.

Another example arises from my own writing practices. I have seen myself improve as a writer in the last two years because I have been diligent about observing and adopting traits and writing styles from my American peers. However, I observe that my Indian friends in the engineering departments at Auburn still need to break away from the typical “Indianness” in their writing. To this a question arises whether there is a single set of English-language documents to convey technical or scientific information to varied audiences? (Amant, 2001). Today, there are varieties of English; example, Indian English, Chinese English, Australian English, Canadian English etc. A native speaker of American English would feel proud to see that his language has been so successful; however, his pride may be tinged with the concern that people, including first language English speakers, in many countries may not use English in the same way as he would and may change it to suit themselves (Crystal, 2003). So what is important to know here is that when communicating to someone from a different cultural background, it is important that we understand and resolve these linguistic differences, in turn mold or raise ourselves to the level of understanding of our audiences. This is what people are largely unaware of as they assume that their way of communication will be understood by anyone they meet. They need to use the rhetoric their audience both prefers and expects. Effective intercultural communication is not just understanding language but also understanding rhetorical expectations. Ulijn (1995) states that when reading or speaking in another language, readers or speakers prefer rhetorical patterns of his or her native culture and even judge the effectiveness of other language documents according to cultural rhetorical expectations. I feel that had I been in a different department at Auburn University, I would still be relying on the communication skills I practiced in India. However, coming to the TPC program made me realize that audience is my focus and that their convenience is my responsibility as a technical communicator. This motivates me to teach technical writing to non-native speakers because most of them follow the writing practices that they learned in their native countries and remain largely unaware or unconcerned with American writing practices or American culture in general. Thus, my aim is to not just provide an international perspective to an American team, but also to help international students pay attention to American communication practices so that they can thrive in the competitive worlds of academia and industry in America.

As I mentioned above, my international background enables me to make a valuable contribution to the field of technical and professional communication. However, coming from a radically different culture and a country where technical communication is still in its incipient stage to a place where technical communication is in demand has intrigued me and opened my eyes to new perspectives in technical communication. For example, during my experience as an associate editor in India, I found some “technical” issues on the websites of academic journals. These issues were related to the efficiency and usability of journal websites, which I realized when I took the course ENGL 7010 Technical and Professional Communication: Issues and Approaches. Thus, the issues that once seemed “technical” to me, I could now better interpret as problems of usability, or the failure to correctly apply solid design principles to web design—principles affecting decisions regarding site navigation, accessibility, and bandwidth. For instance, I learned that something as simple as site navigation can radically affect user experience, which, in turn, affects web traffic and conversion, ultimately resulting in fewer visitors converting into leads or customers. According to Palmer (2000), the concept of navigability encompasses factors like the sequencing of pages, page layout and organization, and consistency of navigation across pages (p. 155). Usability researchers suggest that navigability is important to outcomes (Nielsen 2000). For some journal websites, the path for finding formatting instructions is complicated or the sequence of pages is complex, the headings of the URLs are misleading, and users often end up downloading incorrect formatting templates. Understanding these problems as navigability issue motivated me to conduct usability tests of several journal websites. This testing enabled me to design an expert usability heuristic for journal websites based on the ten heuristics designed by Jacob Nielsen (Heuristic Evaluations).

According to Giammona (2004), the role and importance of the technical communicator has been changing over the last few years in most organizations. Technical communicators are becoming more than writers. They are also becoming product usability experts (p. 352). This has certainly proven true in my own experience: my current role as an editor at Auburn University for an international journal demands that I also understand user needs and design principles to be able to accurately diagnose and address issues on the journal website in order to help authors in their submissions. Today, I can delve into web design issues and look at documents and products with the eye of an outsider to help improve usability and accessibility. Coming to the United States has given me the ability to think from the perspective of a larger audience.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Portfolio Contents**

*Usability Report*

*Course: ENGL 7010 Technical and Professional Communication: Issues and Approaches*

Keywords -Theory/research: usability and accessibility

According to Flavián et al., usability considers the following factors: (1) Ease of understanding the structure of a website, its functions, interface, and the contents that can be observed by the user; (2) Simplicity of use of the website in its initial stages; (3) Speed with which the users can find what they are looking for; (4) Perceived ease of site navigation in terms of time required and action necessary in order to obtain the desired results; and (5) Ability of the user to control what they are doing, and where they are, at any given moment (p. 2). During my previous job role as an associate editor, I frequently found it challenging to locate and comprehend mandatory formatting instructions on journal websites. This affected my editing speed as it consumed most of my time in just finding the exact instructions by navigating from page to page. From these ordeals, I learned that website designers need to have a clear and deep understanding of user requirements and needs in order to create meaningful and valuable user experiences. In addition, designers should consider the time factor so that users can speedily achieve their task. This motivated me to select as an individual research project a usability test to examine the user-friendliness of three journal websites from the standpoint of locating formatting guidelines and understanding instructions in the formatting template.

The purpose of this usability project was to highlight and report usability problems and recommendations for improvement to journal website developers. I created an expert usability review for the websites using the ten heuristics designed by Jacob Nielsen, which also helped me see new usability problems in the websites. The benefit of heuristic evaluation is that it helps designers find important classes of problems that are not always found with user testing (Pinelle et al, 2008). For example, the heuristic parameter of “Flexibility and efficiency of use” made me think whether having multiple links to a single page was a factor of flexibility or an issue of confusion for users. Further, through the user test, I observed that the participants in the test did not fully understand some of the technical information related to formatting papers because of their meagre experience in using advanced Microsoft Word functions for formatting. Moreover, some of the terminology on the websites was misleading, and participants had to go back and forth to locate what they were looking for. Thus, instructions on the websites should be credible, valuable, and comprehensible such that the websites adequately communicate how users are required to navigate and utilize the website.

The most challenging part in this project was explaining this complicated problem of locating formatting instructions through a report. However, visual appeals of screenshots of the webpages and graphs aided in making the report comprehensible. Additionally, I also included comments from the participants, which were recorded when they were performing the test, for the audience to better understand the usability problem. Thus, I believe I was able to precisely delineate evident usability problems on these websites through my usability testing report.

*Infographic Postcard*

*Course: ENGL 7080 Document Design in Technical and Professional Communication*

Keywords - Application: document design

In a team of three, we designed documents for a startup company in Auburn, AL— Livewell Juice Co. Using Adobe InDesign, we were tasked to design a business card, table banner, post card, and booklet based on the company’s protocol for delineating best practices to customers for juice consumption. My role in the group project was designing the post card and editing the protocol. As a portfolio sample I have used the postcard to showcase my document design skills. Along with the rhetoric of a document, the ecology in which it is used—the physical environment of the user—also matters. (Kimball and Hawkins, 2008). Our client did not have a specific location for her business; she would usually set up or reserve a small corner for her business in a coffee shop situated in Auburn. Thus, the postcard was designed considering the physical environment of a coffee shop. I designed it to be a handy informative document placed on the counters of coffee shops for advertisement of the juice company. The logo of the company was deliberately enlarged as it was multicolored, hoping that it would draw attention of customers at the coffee shop and provoke them to pick a postcard.

Kimball and Hawkins state that the physical design of a whole document can have a significant effect on how users respond both to the document itself and to the client (2008). Hence, in order to evoke a positive response from users when they see the postcard, I diligently implemented the six document design principles of similarity, contrast, proximity, alignment, order, and enclosure, and other design theories of visual rhetoric, affordances, figure ground concept etc. In case of typography, typefaces have a persona and they create a visual message (Brumberger, 2002). The postcard mentions four juice flavors: Green Renewal, Minty Refresher, Gold Standard, and Hot Ginger. Thus, the font colors were chosen as per the flavor names, i.e., Green Renewal was formatted in green text and so on, and this color contrast helped differentiate the flavors. The shades of these colored texts were matched with those in the company’s logo in order to maintain the color scheme.

Further, as far the content is considered, I portrayed pathos, ethos, and logos through the use of the company’s tagline, testimonials, and juice protocol information, respectively. The tagline “calm your mind, awaken your soul” created an emotion of having a healthy wellbeing in the audiences, and also reinforced their memory of the product. The list of the juice flavors in the postcard generated logos as it provoked the interested audiences to refer to the protocol document to know more about benefits of the juices and consumption guidelines. In my first design version, I received feedback from my peers on the use of color scheme, and accordingly I improved the design which then included colors from the company’s logo. Although the postcard was a simple two-sided document, I faced issues of having too much white space, but the above-mentioned design principles helped me cover up the space.

*Edited Manuscript*

*Course: ENGL 7000 Technical and Professional Editing*

Keywords - Application: editing

This was the major project of the editing class, where each student edited articles from the magazine *Auburn Speaks*. These articles belonged to scientific as well as a computer-related technical disciplines. The instructor provided us the style guide for *Auburn Speaks*, which we used for formatting considerations. The editing involved sentence correction for grammar, clarity, and readability: checking consistency of numbers, fonts, typefaces, abbreviations, positioning of figures and tables etc. Wherever I was confident about making extensive changes, I made comments to the author explaining the necessity of the change and ensured that my comments were polite. I verified all the references using Google Scholar to check their credibility and ensured all the information was correct and up-to-date.

When editors who edit for grammar and mechanics don’t understand the technical material they are editing, they generally assume that the author is right and do not question the issues. Unfortunately, authors are not always right; many published documents contain errors of oversight on the author’s part. (Grove, 1994, p. 172). My engineering background proved very helpful to me during the editing process because it gave me confidence that I was understanding the meaning and terminology. As a result, I could understand the context and was able to suggest changes to improve the technical matter as well. Nevertheless, when I did encounter content that was confusing and to avoid changing the original meaning, I suggested revision via comments instead of making the changes directly myself.

Authors often dislike when extensive changes are made without explaining them the reason as they fear change of intended meaning. Mackiewicz and Riley have listed sentences that can be used to provide editorial comments and rank them from most to least recommended, on the basis of linguistic theories of politeness and directness in their article “The technical editor as diplomat: Linguistic strategies for balancing clarity and politeness.” Eaton et al reported on an online survey of authors’ preferences in editing using the above list, and it was observed that non-native speakers of American English personally preferred that editorial comments be as direct as possible because the indirect comments took longer to translate and were more difficult to interpret—they could not tell whether a politely worded comment was a command veiled in polite language or a suggestion they could ignore (Eaton et al, 2000, p. 111). Eaton et al also mentioned that writers recommend crafting editing comments as questions rather than commands. However, these questions need to be phrased intelligibly. I have personally experienced that when I frame my comments as questions to authors, they simply answer as “yes” or “no;” they should be made to understand that a question is being asked so that a particular sentence can be rephrased for clarity. An example of my comment in this editing sample is: “I’m unsure whether this relates to the glossary or the entries. Is this referring to the entries? If yes, then it needs to be revised as ‘provide.’” Here, I first asked a question and then provided a solution to the authors. This then ensured that the authors understood that there is a problem that needs to be corrected.

*Literature-Based Analysis of a Problem in Grant Writing*

*Course: ENGL 7070 Grant and Proposal Writing*

Keywords - Theory/research: multicultural, theory: approaches

I wrote a targeted literature review that addressed considerations and strategies particular to writing a hypothetical grant application of interest. Being an international student in an American university, I have closely observed while also experiencing to an extent, the troubles internationals face when they move abroad for education. Thus, the topic I chose for this essay is related to funding for international students: a situation in which a grant application needs to be written requesting funding for minority scholarships. Based on the situation, my target audience is grant writers, and I focused on explaining to them certain facets to consider when writing a grant proposal for minority scholarships, particularly for international populations. Specifically, the essay outlines strategies in grant writing that could be used by grant writers secure grants for research, teaching, and/or practice. This essay reports on the history of published scholarly research and useful sources related to the topic.

I have provided three reasons to support the fact that funding should be provided to international students: (1) Benefits of having internationals students on campus; (2.) Financial problems of international students; (3.) Acculturative stress for international students. I used these reasons to help grant writers understand the issue closely so that they are able to form the needs statement. Trice (2003) conducted a study on the attitudes of faculty toward graduate international students. She emphasized that faculty members find having an international student population beneficial because it welcomes new perspectives and helps local students by providing new foreign research links and business links. International students add to the local economy through direct expenditures and enrich the experiences of domestic students (Owens et al, 2011, 157). These benefits can be continued for the country if suitable support is provided to international students who make tough compromises when living in a different country.

Further, I have suggested that grant writers collect demographic information to find out the number of students coming from undeveloped countries. This information is essential because the standard of the living of the United States is very high for international students, especially those coming from undeveloped countries. This then adds the question of how these students will survive on and later repay education loans. Finally, I introduce the cultural shock these students get when they arrive in the country. These students have a hard time adjusting to the American culture and understanding the system, policies, rules, etc. They also face English proficiency problems and fear racial discrimination. This could lead to depression and acculturative stress, and these factors can affect their studies. While writing this essay, I attempted to remain sensitive to the needs of diverse minority populations so as not to imply that funding should be taken away from or reduced for American minority students in the process of funding international students. I did this by simply focusing on the reasons why international students could legitimately be considered as a minority community in their own right. Additionally, I did not enforce any criteria whether funding should be merit based. My aim is to aid grant writers effectively form their need statement by helping them understand issues from the perspective of an international student.

*Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Practice*

*Course: ENGL 7040 Composition Issues and Approaches*

Keywords - Theory: approaches, ethics: ethics, theory/research: multicultural

This course provided an overview of the issues prevalent in current composition/writing studies history, theory, and pedagogy. The course helped me see how students felt about a writing class and aided me in inventing new approaches to teaching literature as well as composition. Thus, this writing sample demonstrates my philosophy of composition instruction and describes the methods I devised for integrating current theory and practice in classroom instruction. Initially, my philosophy was confined to teaching literature, but as my teaching experience grew I was able to expatiate on my theory of teaching composition. This teaching statement also describes the various activities I devised for teaching writing to my students.

As a writing instructor, I do not lead the class in any authoritarian way; instead, I guide the discussion though various activities so that everyone has a chance to contribute. An old standby of classroom routines, one with which most new teachers are familiar, is the lecture (Glenn and Goldthwaite, 2007, p. 61). According to Glenn and Goldthwaite, many of us admire teachers who deliver brilliant lectures in literature courses. Lectures in writing classes, however, tend to be less helpful to students. They must consist of the application of abstract rhetorical principles because students simply do not learn to write by studying abstract principles (p. 61). I believe that practical knowledge of writing cannot be obtained by listening to lectures on the rules and protocols of writing, it can be achieved only by actually writing and performing writing-based activities. Classroom discussion is probably the teaching method most congenial to writing teachers. The discussion activities I devise reflect my teaching philosophy and include, for example, collaborative learning techniques, ludic activities to improve class interaction, using technology to critically examine social media, and employing discussion forums to investigate rhetoric and public spaces of writing.

Collaborative learning is a widely used concept and teaching strategy in college classrooms today (Lei et al, 2010). According to the Lei et al, it not only prepares college students for the workforce due to the importance of teamwork in the workplace, but also provides opportunities to increase student learning and social-emotional outcomes such as social skills, self-esteem, and attitudes toward others (p. 317). I believe that my duty as a teacher is not just to teach writing but also to teach students how to communicate in professional settings, and I achieve this by arranging various discussions activities. Finally, through my teaching experience, I have observed that some international students face difficulties in writing essays and comprehending writing instruction, and so I also explain how I plan to develop my practice of teaching international students. As an international graduate student myself, I can sense the problems of my international undergraduate students. Thus, I am able to relate with their issues and so I try to modify my instruction to suit their level of understanding. As I move ahead with my PhD and research on the approaches of teaching English composition to non-native speakers, I will be able to develop my teaching statement further.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Works Cited**

Amant, K. S. (1999). When culture and rhetoric contrast: Examining English as the international language of technical communication. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 42(4), 297-300.

Amant, K. S. (2001). Considering China: A perspective for technical communicators. *Technical communication* 48(4), 385-388.

Brumberger, E. R. (2003). The rhetoric of typography: The persona of typeface and text. *Technical communication*, 50(2), 206-223.

Crystal, D. (2012). *English as a global language*. Cambridge university press.

Eaton, A., Brewer, P. E., Portewig, T. C., & Davidson, C. R. (2008). Examining Editing in the Workplace from the Author's Point of View. *Technical Communication*, 55(2), 111-139.

Flavián, C., Guinalíu, M., & Gurrea, R. (2006). The role played by perceived usability, satisfaction and consumer trust on website loyalty. *Information & management*, 43(1), 1-14.

Giammona, B. (2004). The future of technical communication: How innovation, technology, information management, and other forces are shaping the future of the profession. *Technical communication* 51(3), 349-366.

Glenn, C., & Goldthwaite, M. A. (2007). *The St. Martin's guide to teaching writing*. Macmillan.

Grove, L. K. (1994). When the basics aren't enough: finding a comprehensive editor. *IEEE transactions on professional communication*, 37(3), 171-174.

Heuristics evaluations and expert reviews. *Usability.gov*. Retrieved from <https://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/heuristic-evaluation.html>. Accessed 28 November 2016.

Kimball, M. A., & Hawkins, A. R. (2007). Document Design. *Document Design: A Guide for Technical Communicators*.

Lei, S. A., Kuestermeyer, B. N., & Westmeyer, K. A. (2010). Group composition affecting student interaction and achievement: instructors' perspectives. *Journal of instructional psychology*, 37(4), 317-326.

Mackiewicz, J., & K. Riley. 2003. The technical editor as diplomat: Linguistic strategies for balancing clarity and politeness. *Technical communication*, 50(1), 83–94.

Nielsen, J (2000), Designing web usability: The practice of simplicity. New Riders Publishing U.S

Owens, D. L., Srivastava, P., & Feerasta, A. (2011). Viewing international students as state stimulus potential: current perceptions and future possibilities. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21(2), 157-179.

Palmer, J. W. (2002). Web site usability, design, and performance metrics. *Information systems research* 13(2), 151-167.

Pinelle, D., Wong, N., & Stach, T. (2008). Heuristic evaluation for games: usability principles for video game design. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1453-1462.

Thrush, E. A. (1997). Multicultural issues in technical communication. In *Foundations for teaching technical communication: Theory, practice, and program design, ed.* Katherine Staples and Cezar Ornatowski. Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 161–178.

Trice, A. G. (2003). Faculty perceptions of graduate international students: The benefits and challenges. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7(4), 379-403.

Ulijn, J. M. (1996). Translating the culture of technical documents: Some experimental evidence. *International Dimensions of Technical Communication*. D. C. Andrews, Ed. Arlington, VA: STC, 69–86.

Williams, C. (2017). Tim Cook discusses diversity, inclusion with students. *ThePlainsman.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.theplainsman.com/article/2017/04/tim-cook-discusses-diversity-inclusion-with-students>. Accessed 30 March 2017.