



INTERVIEW WITH SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION GRADUATE EVELYN HELMINEN

**BY JESSICA BOELCKE
HU 2600 – October 7, 2016**

My purpose for this interview was to learn more about the field of Scientific and Technical Communications from a professional who is currently practicing in the field. The information that came from the interview helped me solidify my decision in choosing this major and where I can take my career in the future.

WHY CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW?

When I came to Michigan Technological University in 2014, I had goals of pursuing a degree in Computer Engineering. Unfortunately after a semester I found that the major lacked as much creativity as I craved in my future career. I switched majors a few times after that until I discovered and landed on Scientific and Technical Communication. On paper it looked like an excellent blend of science based information and creative ways to communicate it.

Evelyn has had a very successful career since earning her degree in this field from Michigan Tech. Since she has done so much work in various places, I thought that she would have a good idea about the breadth and depth that STC could take a person. My biggest questions going into the interview were what exactly was the Scientific and Technical Communication program and how much creativity was allowed in these jobs after graduation? My hopes were that Evelyn would have the answers and experience to help me solidify my choice of major.

HOW DID THE INTERVIEW HAPPEN?

Because both Evelyn and I had busy schedules, I proposed that we conduct the interview over email. That way I would be able to structure the questions the way I wanted them without rambling and she would be able to answer the questions when she had the free time. I sent out the initial questions over in an email on September 13, 2016 and she got back to me the next week. The interview questions that I sent her were a product of multiple drafts, each edited so that I could get the information that would best help me learn the answers to my major goals of this assignment (see Appendix B).

WHAT CAME FROM THE INTERVIEW?

I had several major categories of questions in my interview: her background, her career, and how she relates her skills to her career.

Evelyn grew up in Calumet, Michigan and worked part-time at her parent's print shop. By working there she learned that she really liked graphic design, which played a good part in her liking Scientific and Technical Communications. She started at Michigan Technological University in 2003 and had an internship at Scholastic in Danbury, Connecticut as a graphic designer for marketing materials. That internship along with her professional portfolio that she built up throughout school helped her acquire a job after graduating in 2007.

Her first job after Michigan Tech was working at a website marketing company in Duluth, Minnesota where she daily spend a lot of time using Photoshop. Her job wasn't defined as Technical Writing, but instead graphic designer which is something I was especially interested in because designing has become my favorite part of this major thus far. After designing website skins for companies in Minnesota, she spend a few summers working for a charter fishing company in Sitka, Alaska. There her job morphed into marketing where she did a variety of projects, including logo design, brochures, a weekly blog, revising the website, and creating a guide on how to take better pictures of fish. She had a great amount of freedom in her work because she was the only person in her department—only reporting to her boss for input. Following her summers in Alaska she worked with the Peace Corp in Armenia as an IT volunteer. During her two years abroad she helped by teaching usability of computer programs and website building at an Armenian college. Since coming back to the United States she has been working in Monterey, California at Middlebury Institute of International studies.

My main concerns with how she related her career experience to her experience in college was her creative freedom and how her acquired skills were used. With all of the jobs that she has had creativity has been a core dynamic, allowing her to not only use her skills in design but also the leniency to do with her work how she chooses. Along with creativity I also wanted to know about how her skills in writing manuals—which is traditionally what is expected of a major such as STC—relates to what she does with personalized teaching. Her answer was that while in writing “you have to try to anticipate the questions that the average user will have and then try to answer those in your document”, in teaching you have to be able to customize your lesson to the individual (See Appendix A).

To conclude the interview, I asked what her dream job would be. She said that she would love to own a business so that she could work for herself. Along with that she runs a blog and offers coaching services. She is currently editing a novel that she hopes to have published one day.

WHAT DID I LEARN FROM THE INTERVIEW?

I started out this interview knowing that I was really enjoying the major of Scientific and Technical Communication, but still having questions about whether I was going to have enough creative flexibility to make me happy in a career. Evelyn has shown me that you can take your degree wherever you want to pursue your ideas and interests. Throughout her career she has had countless creative outlets and was able to travel around the world doing what she loved. Even though it is extremely easy to just say “we write manuals” whenever someone asks about what my major is about, I will now be able to explain that it isn’t simply a step-by-step process. Instead it is a way of translating what is understandable to highly specialized professionals into a version that anybody can relate to and make usable. This translation doesn’t only use writing, but also design and media. I am now confident in choosing this major and am excited to see what this career can offer me.

References

Markel, Mike H. (2016). *Practical strategies for technical communication* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins.

APPENDIX A

Transcript of Interview with Evelyn Helminen via Gmail

1. What years were you in college?

I was in college from 2003-2007.

2. Did you go into college knowing that you wanted to be an STC major? If not, what made you want to switch over from your previous major?

I started as an STC major. I'm from Calumet originally, and wanted to go to college close to home, which is why I chose Tech. When I had to choose my major, I looked through the entire course catalog and thought that STC looked the most interesting to me. I liked that it was a communication-heavy major because I liked writing and reading, and I also liked that there was a design component, because I had already been doing some graphic design in my part-time job at my parents' print shop. One of my goals going into college was to finish in 4 years, so I picked a major right away and stuck with it so I wouldn't have any issues with trying to transfer credits. I don't think it's the most compelling story or reason for choosing STC; I was very pragmatic in making my choice. But I was happy with the program.

3. How would you define Scientific and Technical Communications?

I never really liked the name of the degree because it doesn't fully encompass what the program offers. I define Scientific and Technical Communication as a field where you take industry jargon and transform it into something that the lay person understands so they can use it in some way. But I also think that the field is broad and to better understand it, you need to add that it can take many forms--not just writing, which is the first thing people automatically think of. It is usually a combination of writing and design, and with the various forms of media available today, the medium through which the communication happens is constantly expanding. Also, "industry" is a broad word for more than just the very technical, specialized fields of work. It could be literally any business that wants to communicate with someone with less, or different, knowledge than they have.

4. How have the skills you learned in college helped you in the professional field?

College gave me a good base of tools to work with. I got my feet wet with a lot of programs in the Adobe Creative Suite, and learned how to make a basic website with HTML and CSS. I also learned a lot about what makes a good design and got a lot of practice critiquing and being critiqued, which helped in the work world when I had employers who had a critical eye for my designs. I knew how to take it without getting offended. I also learned a lot about good and thorough writing techniques that I use to this day.

5. Did you get hired at Middlebury right out of school or were there other jobs that you had in between?

I have had a number of different jobs since I graduated from Tech. (I'll combine this question with the next one.) I started in Duluth, MN, working at a website marketing company. I was a graphic designer, creating website "skins" for

various clients. In that job, I used Photoshop every single day, for almost 8 hours/day. Then I worked several summers in a row at a charter fishing company located in Sitka, AK. I did a huge variety of work there, from designing a logo, magazine ads, and a huge 6-fold brochure, to writing a weekly blog, revising the copy on most of the website, creating a guide on how to take better pictures of your fish, and more. I was basically a one-woman marketing/design department, with input from my boss. I also started a daily "catch of the day" collage with pictures that clients had from fishing each day.

In 2011 I joined the Peace Corps and went to Armenia for 2 years. Because of my background in using computers for design and website work, I was chosen as an IT volunteer. I worked at a college in Armenia teaching how to use computer programs and build websites.

It was after I got home from Peace Corps that I got my job at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, and moved to Monterey, CA. I have been here now for almost 3 years.

6. Where have you had to move for a job?

See above

7. What do you think were the most important attributes on your resume that helped you get your first major job right out of college?

I would definitely say that my work experience at my parents' print shop and my internship between my junior and senior years at Tech were the most valuable, followed by my professional portfolio, which had a combination of real-world work and school projects. I interned at Scholastic in Danbury, CT for 11 weeks as a graphic designer. I designed and edited a lot of marketing materials for scholastic book clubs during that time.

8. Do you feel that training staff how to use software in person is more different or the same as writing technical documents/directions?

It's a lot different. When you are writing, you have to try to anticipate the questions that the average user will have and then try to answer those in your document. You have to be careful not to make the wrong assumptions about what your audience already knows. When you are teaching in person, you can customize your teaching to the individual user, and teach to their line of questioning and to their level of need. You can also check in to see if they understand what you're saying. You don't have that luxury when you are writing.

In my current job, I do a lot of in-person teaching, but I also send a lot of emails with "how-to" directions for people who can't meet with me in person.

9. What is your favorite part of being the Assistant Director for Digital Initiatives?

I get to work on a wide variety of projects for all levels of the institution and various audiences. For example, I am helping to create a series of workshops to establish communication norms and best practices for staff, I work with students to help them create online portfolios so they can get a good job, I help faculty with setting up their course materials in our new learning management system, and I am working on an initiative that offers domains to everyone in the Middlebury community where they can explore and build their digital identity- this initiative is called "MiddCreate" and spans the entire institution that

includes Middlebury college in Middlebury, VT, as well as the Middlebury language schools, Schools Abroad, and more. I designed the website, which can be found at MiddCreate.net.

Finally, I do a lot of internal work for my department which is called the "Digital Learning Commons," including some of the website work at DLC.middcreate.net, and creating teaching and learning resources for our staff of graduate assistants.

10. To what degree are you allowed to be creative in the projects that you lead?

To a very high degree. For me, creativity is the spice of life, and if I were not allowed to pursue my own ideas in my job, I would leave that job and find another. My current job has a lot of flexibility in this regard

11. What would be your dream job?

I really want to own my own business and work for myself. I'm still discovering what that means for me, but I am working in that direction. On the side, I am offering accountability coaching services and writing my blog, which can be found at atravelingev.com. I also want to be a published author. I'm editing a science fiction novel currently, which I hope to have published when it's done. It's been a long process so far, but I'm making progress!

12. What would you have wanted yourself to know in college that you know now?

I was pretty stressed about finding a job, and finding the "right" job when I was a senior. Now, after having worked several jobs and moving to many different places, I realize that it's a constantly evolving process. Everywhere I've worked has taught me something I have been able to take to the next stage in my life. I wish I had known that I would learn from all of life's experiences, so whatever I found first would be just fine and that would help me get to the next thing.

APPENDIX B

Field Notes from Interview

***Drafts of interview questions due to the interview being done over email.**

1. Did you go into college knowing that you wanted to be a STC major? If not, what made you want to switch over?
2. How have the skills you learned in college helped you in the professional field?
3. Did you get hired at Middlebury right out of school or was there other jobs you had in between?
4. What do you think were the most important attributes on your resume that helped you get your job?
5. What is your favorite part of being the Assistant Director for Digital Initiatives?
6. To what degree are you allowed to be creative in the projects you lead?
7. What would be your dream job?

My main goal in this interview is to get an insight into Evelyn's non-conventional career in Scientific and Technical communications (meaning that she doesn't just write directions). I want to discover what makes her enjoy her work and what kind of creative ideas she is allowed to use in her projects.

1. What years were you in college?
2. Did you go into college knowing that you wanted to be an STC major? If not, what made you want to switch over from your previous major?
3. How would you define Scientific and Technical Communications?
4. How have the skills you learned in college helped you in the professional field?
5. Did you get hired at Middlebury right out of school or were there other jobs that you had in between?
6. Where have you had to move for a job?
7. What do you think were the most important attributes on your resume that helped you get your first major job right out of college?
8. Do you feel that training staff how to use software in person is more different or the same as writing technical documents/directions?
9. What is your favorite part of being the Assistant Director for Digital Initiatives?
10. To what degree are you allowed to be creative in the projects that you lead?
11. What would be your dream job?
12. What would you have wanted yourself to know in college that you know now?

~~13. (Optional Question) How do you want to advance your career to achieve a job closest to your dream job?~~