CONCLUSION

Remaking the Future of Technical Communication with LwDITA

Congratulations! Your content is now intelligent! So intelligent that you should help it with those college applications for Ivy League schools. Wait a minute. . . actually, I have not seen any of *your* content. Unless your content consists of little stubs of topics about pasta sauce recipes, sushi restaurants, or ice cream-based treats, all the content samples in this book were my examples. Now it is your turn to apply some of the recommendations from *Creating Intelligent Content with Lightweight DITA* to your content. It does not have to be technical documentation, and it does not have to be cross-format in all three available LwDITA flavors. If you and your team are comfortable working in HTML and do not want to explore alternatives, you can use HDITA and ignore everything else. If Markdown works for you and you do not want to deal with tags, there is a lot you can accomplish with MDITA – even in its core profile.

My main recommendation for any plan for implementing ideas discussed in this book is the same for all scenarios: do not jump directly to writing code and copying all your existing content from, say, a word processor to a text editor or LwDITA-aware software application. Writing is a process regardless of medium; paper and pen, word processor, or cross-format LwDITA content repository. . . all these writing environments need a plan. Focus on the abstractions from Chapter 8 and develop a strategy that works for your content requirements. Maybe things in your world are complex and full DITA XML will be the way to go, or maybe you are not ready to adopt LwDITA and will just want some ideas about computational thinking to improve your process in a web content management system. As long as you keep in mind the abstractions behind the process and the structure that enables the production of discoverable, reconfigurable, and adaptable content, my job will be done.

If being an early adopter is not in your nature, and you would rather wait for LwDITA-aware apps that hide all instances of code (even Markdown) and offer a WYSIWYG-like environment, I do not blame you. The existing tool support for DITA is strong for its main target audience of technical communicators. Nevertheless, the Lightweight DITA subcommittee expects that the expanded audience of LwDITA (which ventures into marketing content and contributions from subject matter experts, among other groups) will attract a new wave of developers who were not interested in DITA XML.

We might need to be patient before we see a broad variety of LwDITA tools. The LwDITA standard is still a work in progress, and as of this writing we are evaluating some implementation ideas. You can always track the progress of LwDITA adoption on the website and materials produced by the Lightweight DITA subcommittee at OASIS.

What is in it for You?

In *Creating Intelligent Content with Lightweight DITA* I tried to place human authors at the center of intelligent content workflows. Human processes like thinking and abstraction should take place before any automation or machine processing, and authors should be at the center of a LwDITA-based publishing workflow, taking precedence over any software tools.

Creating Intelligent Content with Lightweight DITA recognizes the many shapes and backgrounds of those human authors. Bridging my roles as co-chair of the Lightweight DITA subcommittee and professor of technical communication is my identity as a Mexican-American researcher who came to the academic side of content development via computer science. I see the need for more inclusive writing technologies and methodologies from different perspectives, including disciplinary constraints, ethnicity, and language. Answering the call from Jones et al. (2016) for a more inclusive focus in technical and professional communication research, I actively pushed for the LwDITA authoring formats to move away from the prescriptive textual nature of DITA XML. Whereas, for example, a DITA task requires an author to be proficient enough in English to remember the spelling of **<shortdesc>**, **<steps>**, **<hazardstatement>**, or **<steptroubleshooting>**, in LwDITA an author can use more familiar HTML5 tags or the *atx* headers of Markdown. The MDITA topic type, which does not depend on tags written in English, makes LwDITA even more accessible to a variety of authors from diverse professional communities and cultural identities.

Those human authors are also shaped by their job titles and responsibilities, which also affect their expectations and next steps that I recommend after reading this book.

If you are a current DITA user, you should not panic and start a migration process to convert all your topics to LwDITA. The DITA standard is not going away, and LwDITA does not have the purpose of replacing it. If you are

adventurous and have some time for experiments, you should give LwDITA a try and discuss your findings with your manager or IT department. If you are a content developer who is not a DITA user, give LwDITA a try by bringing your own tools, preferences, and workflows. Evaluate if a transition would be feasible and, above all things, do not expect miracles. LwDITA simplifies the production of intelligent content, but good content creation equals busy work in any tool or environment. Talk to your manager or IT department after exploring the LwDITA authoring formats.

If you are one of those managers or IT professionals, read the sentence about not expecting miracles. Read it a couple of times just to be sure. Then, determine if your users and processes can function in LwDITA. I have met many users who simply cannot be trusted to be in environments that do not enforce structure in sections or paragraphs. In some of those cases, the relaxed structure of LwDITA could create new problems. And we all have heard of companies of all sizes that have decades of content production stored in Microsoft Word or, even worse, PowerPoint files. Content conversion of hundreds of unstructured files will be busy work even if the new format is a LwDITA flavor.

If you are a developer, open source or commercial, please help the Lightweight DITA subcommittee create tools to lower the barrier for adoption of the proposed standard. We need apps for authoring, processing, migrating, and automating the content experience with XDITA, HDITA, and MDITA. We need tools to make the process of producing intelligent content with LwDITA as simple as possible. Reach out to the Lightweight DITA subcommittee at OASIS.

If you are in academia, develop a plan for teaching and practicing content strategy, experiment with the available LwDITA tools, and participate in public reviews of materials produced by the Lightweight DITA subcommittee[1]. All our work is open to the public and we depend on feedback. If the feedback only comes from industry, the fault lines get deeper. Bring your voice and interests to the process of producing information standards. Adopt principles of computational thinking in your teaching and research and contribute to redefining the quite annoying term of "traditionally non-computing discipline" that labels writing and communication.

Chapter 1 included a recap of the Adobe video on the future of tech comm, and you can now remake that future by expanding the possibilities of structured content without depending on one single authoring format. With LwDITA, XML is just one of the available agents, and content components for simple expressions of machine-ready metadata and multimedia elements that were not included in previous versions of the DITA standard are available out of the box. Brad Mehlenbacher predicted the future of technical communication as "uncertain and indeterminate" (2013, p. 205). The simple act of learning and implementing a standard for structuring content will not change that forecast. However, adopting the cross-silo collaboration built on principles of computational thinking

that LwDITA enables surely will contribute to preparing technical communicators as the "rhetorically sensitive sociotechnical mediators" (Mehlenbacher, 2013, p. 206) that the future demands.

Note

1 https://www.oasis-open.org/committees/tc_home.php?wg_abbrev=dita-lightweight-dita

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