



May 2009, Volume 21, Number 9

May dinner and Annual General Meeting

5:45 p.m.
Tuesday, May 5, 2009
Place Louis Riel
190 Smith Street

Finding the muse in technical communication
Christina Penner

Members
Free including dinner.
Cost for Non-members
\$5 including dinner.
Many exciting door prizes to win!

Please confirm your attendance by noon, Friday, May 1, with the Meeting coordinator:
meetingcoordinator@stcmanitoba.org

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**2008 STC
Community of Excellence**

STC Manitoba is a chapter of



Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication

STC May dinner meeting

Finding the muse in technical communication

A common tenet of technical communication is to use clear and simple language. The tone of the language may differ, but the goal of the language is the same: to offer a sparkingly clear window-pane into a particular set of knowledge or skills.

However, many language theorists argue that even the most simple language is distorted by reality. Some theorists argue language actually changes reality. Under these paradigms, technical communicators have a responsibility to acknowledge their influence on the text, and by extension, on the information itself. Technical communicators must understand their role in a text and the creative nature of any text.

There are also practical reasons for inviting the personal and creative into technical writing. Bekins and Williams argue that technical writers are now working in a creative economy and as such must "rely on "high skills" that include creativity, ability to navigate ambiguity, comfort with multiplicity and complexity, interpersonal understanding and empathy, synthesis, pattern recognition, and the ability to tell good stories" (*Technical Communication*, August 2006).

Using examples, including the (extraordinarily) unconventional on-line user guide, *Why's Poignant Guide To Ruby*, this talk will consider the capacity of language, the role of the author, and the importance of personality and creativity in technical communication.

About the speaker

Christina Penner teaches technical communication in the Computer Science department at the University of Manitoba. Her research interests are in new media texts, and in the interplay between creative and technical writing. Recently, her third-year technical communication students collectively authored a wiki-based textbook that is now the required text for the University of Manitoba's first-year computer science course.

Last fall Christina released her first novel, *Widows of Hamilton House*. The novel is short-listed for three Manitoba book awards.

About Manuscript

Manuscript and its shorter sibling *Micro Manuscript* are the official newsletters of STC Manitoba. Together, they are published 10 times annually between September and June. The opinions expressed are those of the authors. Submissions, news, reviews, and other items of interest are welcome. Contributions may be edited for length. Deadline is the fifteenth of every month. For example, the deadline for the November issue is October 15. Please make arrangements in advance with the editor. By submitting an article, you agree to its publication in *Manuscript* and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. The writer holds copyright. When submitting an article, please let the editor know if it has been published or submitted elsewhere.

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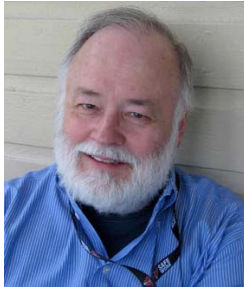
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Members of Manitoba's STC chapter gather at the Annual General Meeting in May and elect members to the STC Chapter. Each member on the executive is elected for a term of one year.

From the (Interim) President



Getting an overview on the way things are can be quite a challenge.

For example, to get an overview on the flood risks faced by Manitobans, I can walk a couple of blocks to get a view of the Red River lapping at its artificially raised banks in my Winnipeg neighbourhood, or listen to CBC radio about major ice events on Breezy Point, or catch snippets of North Dakota TV news. At this point,

American TV news seems to have been the most effective and stable indicator of what's happening and about to happen.

For another example, let's consider the state of the economy and its implications for technical communicators. Over the decades that I've followed a career in technical communication, I've been fascinated with (and disturbed by) how difficult it is to tell what my job prospects are going to be beyond the conclusion of the current contract. On some occasions, major downturns in the economy have apparently logically been associated with scarce opportunities for technical communicators; on other occasions, a downturn in the economy in general seems to have actually generated opportunities for technical communicators. Several factors probably contribute to the difficulty in making this prediction—among them, factors such as the following:

- Winnipeg's very thin market for technical communication services
- the dependence of the demand for technical communication services on what are often seen as much "earlier" stages of work on projects—often a lag of years
- major gaps in the understanding of decision makers with regard to how we can contribute to a project—for instance, it often does not occur to them that we can plan our own work and contribute to the overall planning of a project
- a general lack of reliable information on what the current state of affair is

My sense is that the current state of affairs is good. This is founded largely on the fact that a number of us, myself included, who weren't working in technical communication a few months ago are now working in our preferred profession.

I hope that my example about predicting floods is not mirrored in the actual outcome of my example about predicting local opportunities for work in technical communication. The bleak signs from south of the border were the best indicator of flooding conditions. The signs from south of the border regarding the economy are the worst I can recall. Our own professional organization, STC, has taken more dramatic action than I have ever seen to stop membership levels from free fall. For the time being at least our chapter is a beneficiary of this action. Along with two other chapters in our size category, we performed well in membership renewals and have received some prizes for allocation to members

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From the Editor

To tweet or not to tweet?

If you haven't been paying attention, you might be missing out on the increasing popularity of twitter. Some of you might be wondering, what's twitter? For those who don't know or need a refresher, twitter is a social media site that allows anyone to connect with friends, family, and others through quick and simple exchanges via the Internet or on a cell phone. Users have 140 characters to respond to the question "What are you doing now?"

Twitter was first established in August 2006, as a means for the creator Jack Dorsey, to learn what his friends were doing. Twitter works basically as a giant instant messaging board, for a potentially large audience (if you're CNN or Ashton Kutchner). Once you sign up for free on twitter, you can begin posting snippets of your daily life immediately. If you know of any friends or family who are on twitter, all you have to do is click one button: "follow" to keep up with their activities. If this analogy doesn't make sense, you can find a video in Plain English on the twitter Web site.

I first heard about twitter over a year ago when I was taking a course on new technologies. Although the concept sounded interesting, I opted

to forego the opportunity to tweet as I felt that my life wasn't that exciting to be captured in 140 characters. Do my friends and family really want to know that I'm going out to get a slurpee? Probably not.

Recently, twitter has made big news, primarily with the quest to reach one million followers by both CNN and actor Ashton Kutchner. In the end, Ashton won out; however, I cannot help him celebrate in his claim to fame as I was not one of his followers. The site made big news when Oprah Winfrey signed up for her own account on a recent show of hers.

The interesting thing about twitter is the speed at which people can provide updates. A report in the May 2008 issue of *New Scientist* showed that instant messaging systems did a better job of keeping people updated than traditional media or government sources. That's some food for thought, isn't it?

While I still contemplate whether or not to tweet, you can always sign up for your own account at <http://twitter.com>.

Until next month,
Rachel

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as a result. A free registration for the STC Summit in Atlanta, Georgia, has already been won by Caroline Ben-Ari. Four more extraordinary prizes from STC (international) will be awarded as door prizes at the Annual General Meeting on May 5— they are the following:

- One 19" Flat Screen LCD Television
- One Epson – Stylus Multifunction Photo Printer/Copier/Scanner
- Two \$50 gift cards for Amazon.com

As you can see, our Annual General Meeting will be well worth attending. Not only for our guest speaker, Christina Penner, and executive update, but for some great prizes as well.

Andrew

STC Manitoba Annual General Meeting

Tuesday, May 5, 2009 is our annual general meeting. We're asking all chapter members to come out for the meeting to vote in the new executive committee for the 2009–2010 year. We are still looking for volunteer members for the executive. If you're interested, please contact Brad at brad.l.friesen@gmail.com.

At this year's Annual General Meeting, members will be asked to approve extensively revised bylaws and a set of policies and procedures designed to govern several matters that will no longer be specified in the bylaws. We have been asked by STC headquarters to bring our bylaws into alignment with a model bylaw based on New York State laws. You can download the draft from http://stcmanitoba.org/chapter_bylaws/2009_STC_Manitoba_Chapter_Bylaws_May-2009V2.pdf.

Please come out to the meeting, we need you there to meet quorum and approve our new bylaws. Your attendance is important!

Adventures with Ubuntu

By Leslie McKendry-Smith

Steve and I recently added a new computer to our collection. Technically, it's not a new computer. It's more of a revived computer. In early March, we transformed my four year old notebook into a dual boot Windows/Ubuntu computer.

Ubunwhat?

Ubuntu is the world's most popular and fastest growing Linux distribution. It has an easy to use graphical user interface that would be comfortable for any Windows or Mac user. It's open source and it's free.

For Steve and me, the attraction of Ubuntu is that Linux is designed to be more secure than either Windows or Mac. If you regularly connect your notebook to public networks in libraries, schools, airports, hotels, and coffee shops, Linux is a far better choice than other operating systems.

Another advantage of Ubuntu over Windows and—yes—Mac is that it has lower processor and memory requirements. You can extend the useful life of an older computer by switching to Linux, as long as you can live without the latest Windows or Mac applications.

For a more detailed look at Linux, see Brad Friesen's article, "Making the Switch to Linux," in the May 2007 issue of *Manuscript*.

How this adventure began

Previously, I'd never considered adding Ubuntu to my notebook. I'm just too dependent on Windows only applications to even think about it.

But last fall my notebook started acting up a bit. It was sluggish and the mouse wasn't responsive. Since the computer celebrated its fourth birthday in late November, I assumed that it was just old age. I was actually quite impressed that the computer had lasted four years.

The situation worsened over the winter. Finally, on my birthday in late February, it blue screened—twice. I resigned myself to shopping for a replacement but my curiosity led me to research the problem a bit.

The error message indicated a driver failure. I

guessed that the mouse driver was likely corrupt but drivers don't become corrupt for no reason. I thought that the root cause was probably a failing hard drive.

Since I was having a bad week, I decided to spend a few dollars for a diagnostic and let an expert take a look at it.

The computer shop confirmed my diagnosis of a bad hard drive. They quoted \$250 to clean the computer, replace the drive, and reload Windows. That was much more than I wanted to invest in a four year old computer.

I'd already decided to buy a new notebook so Steve wondered if it was worth our time to try to revive the old one ourselves. Other than the time and effort involved, the cost would be less than \$100 to replace the hard drive.

And if we were going to revive it, why not install Ubuntu?

Why not, indeed.

Planning the transformation

We didn't dive right into this project. Instead, we took some time to consider what we wanted to do and how we would go about it.

The first thing we had to decide was whether we would create a dual boot computer with Windows XP and Ubuntu or just install Ubuntu.

After much discussion, we decided that we had nothing to lose and a small amount to gain by installing both.

I still occasionally need to use Word 2003 and Steve prefers Power Point to Open Office Impress. Also, Windows XP handles media better than Ubuntu. We don't anticipate watching a lot of movies on this computer, but you never know what you'll want in the future. (While media is not Ubuntu's strong point, there are other Linux distributions that handle media very well.)

The next question to answer was what size hard drive to get.

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We looked at the hard drive use on our existing computers. How much of our usage was applications, data, and media? We decided that 120 gigabytes (GB) would be an appropriate size. In the end, we bought a 160 GB hard drive because that's what the computer store had in stock.

Now that we have 160 GB to play with, how should we divide it between Windows and Ubuntu?

From previous experience, we knew that it is possible to access the other partition from each operating system. (This assumption turned out to be untrue with the latest version of Ubuntu. More on that later.) We figured that we should assign majority of the drive to Ubuntu since it is the operating system that we expect to use the most. We would give Windows 60 GB and Ubuntu would get the remainder.

Deciding the order in which to install the operating systems took longer.

I was all for installing Windows first and then Ubuntu. My reasons were that I didn't know anyone who had done it the other way around and I'm much more comfortable with having Ubuntu partition the drive than Windows.

Steve needed a bit more to go on than gut feelings. He needed a logical reason and found one.

When you install Ubuntu after Windows, Ubuntu automatically includes Windows as a choice in the boot loader. (The boot loader is a small Linux program that lets you choose which operating system to load.) If you install Ubuntu first, Windows doesn't appear in the boot loader list.

The final decision to make was which Ubuntu version to install.

There are always two current versions available. One is a long term support version that is supported for three years from the time of issue. This version is intended for situations where upgrading every six months to a year is impractical.

Since Steve and I are comfortable upgrading regularly, we went with the more recent version, version 8.10 (Intrepid Ibex).

Now for the real work

Installing Windows and Ubuntu went far more smoothly than I expected. Not including downloading and installing updates for both operating systems, the process took only a couple of hours. Installing Windows took much longer than installing Ubuntu, but we didn't have any difficulties. It was just slow.

The next day, I downloaded updates. I was thankful that it's an automatic process for both Windows and Ubuntu because it took the better part of the morning.

In our house there is still men's work and women's work. Setting up networking and file sharing is women's work.

Based on my previous experience with a much earlier version of Ubuntu, I wasn't looking forward to this task. This time I was astounded and amazed at how easy it was. After experimenting with permissions a bit, I was able to share files between Ubuntu and three other computers each running a different version of Windows.

I wish setting up file sharing in Vista was that easy!

Nothing is perfect

Unfortunately, in life and Ubuntu, nothing is perfect. We've had to do some tweaking and make some modifications to get Ubuntu to behave the way we want. In the end, there were two issues that we couldn't resolve.

Earlier I mentioned that, when we were deciding on partition sizes, we assumed that Windows could read the Ubuntu partition.

Windows can't read a Linux file system on its own, but there are several Windows applications available that will. Unfortunately, they don't work with Ubuntu version 8.

There is a very minor change to the file system in version 8—something called inode 256 (I'll let you look it up.)—that is incompatible with all of the available applications for reading Linux file systems except for one, and that one is an early beta version.

We've decided to take a wait and see approach. Eventually, developers will add inode 256 support

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to their applications. In the mean time, we have lots of room on both partitions.

The second disappointment was that the version of Open Office bundled with Unbuntu turned out to be version 2.4 not 3.

I considered upgrading but discovered that upgrading a bundled application isn't straight forward. The update manager doesn't indicate that version 3 is available so I would have to upgrade manually. I've learned that a manual upgrade is much more difficult in Ubuntu than in Windows.

Fortunately, the next version of Ubuntu will be available in late April and will include Open Office 3. While we're waiting, we just have to remember that we can't open Office 2007 files.

Should you try Ubuntu?

Unbuntu isn't for everyone. You have to be willing

Leslie McKendry-Smith is a technical communication consultant and senior member of STC Manitoba. Leslie and her husband Steve are long time computer geeks. They met in high school Computer Science class in 1975 and have far too many computers in their home.

to get your hands a little dirty.

If you're the type of person who needs directions for every computer task, you will become frustrated quickly. Ubuntu documentation is very thin.

But if you're curious, like to learn new things, and not afraid to make some mistakes, installing Ubuntu can be an interesting and challenging project.

That older computer gathering dust in your basement might work well with Ubuntu. Ubuntu system requirements are quite reasonable and you might be able to bring an old computer back to life.

Visit the Ubuntu web site at www.unbuntu.com and see for yourself.

While you're doing that, I'm going shopping for a pair of Birkenstocks.

Professional development courses

Course	Date (2009)	Offered through
Mastering reports and proposals	May 5	University of Winnipeg
Creative thinking for problem solving	May 9	
Managing projects for better results	May 20 and 27	
Technical Communications: Intro	May 1–Sept 7	Red River College
MS 2007 Word: Level 2	May 6–13	
Effective listening techniques	May 9	
Designing and writing manuals	July 13–21	
Project planning, estimating, and scheduling	July 20–24, 27	

For more information about the courses listed, consult the institution's Web site.

Red River College Continuing and Distance Education: www.rrc.mb.ca

University of Winnipeg Continuing Education: www.dce.uwinnipeg.ca