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(RE)CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Academics Collaborating with Workplace Professionals—the NIU/Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development

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In this chapter, the type of "innovation" described is neither earth shaking nor futuristically high tech; rather, it captures the original meaning of innovate, the etymology of which is from the Latin *innovare,* (to renew): *in* + *novare,* to make new, renew. Specifically, it describes how the technical communication program at Northern Illinois University has been renewed and enriched by its affiliation with the Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development. Through the collaborative efforts of many teachers, researchers, and practitioners of technical communication, the Institute offers courses for traditional students and working professionals that merge theory and practice and that carry either graduate or undergraduate credit or continuing education units (CEUs). Among the features that make this partnership unique is the extraordinary amount of interaction that occurs at every stage of the courses—before, during, and after—and at every level, from the boardroom to the classroom, and in every way, from curricular planning, marketing, teaching, and mentoring, to postcourse follow-up assessments and focus groups.

INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES

Technical communication programs face a number of challenges now and in the future: shrinking budgets, downsizing of faculty, increased competition for student market share, growing territoriality among departments, and rapidly obsolescent hardware and software. Increasingly, we are asked to do more with less. At the same time, the field of technical communication has grown so rapidly that it is virtually

impossible to keep abreast of the many developments within and outside academe. For those who, like me, are in departments with only one or two faculty members specializing in technical communication, developing undergraduate and graduate programs in this field becomes exceptionally challenging, especially with the add-on responsibilities of supervising internship programs, running the student chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), and helping place graduating students.

Let us assume, then, that no one is going to lighten our workload, that our hardware and software will always be a few versions behind industry standards, that the extra faculty members we need are not going to magically materialize, and that the field of technical communication will continue to evolve at dizzying speeds. Not an unrealistic scenario for most of us. Given this scenario, the question then becomes how do we improve the quality of our programs and give students meaningful educational experiences, without substantial additional resources and without putting further pressure on ourselves?

The key, as many of us have argued, is in exploring ways of involving others who most have a vested interest in the quality of students' education: those in government, business, and industry who eventually become students' employers. Paul Anderson (1995) has emphasized the importance of involving various stakeholders in our program planning, and Michael Keene (1997), in *Education in Scientific and Technical Communication: Academic Programs That Work,* has noted that the most successful programs feature internships, co-ops, practicums, and advisory boards. As for other types of affiliations, *Technical Communication* devoted an entire issue to the theme "Toward 2000: Education, the Society, and the Profession," and in one of the articles, Deborah S. Bosley (1995) described eight types of linkages between academia and industry and the benefits of each: classroom and curricula activities; student-faculty on-site opportunities; professional conferences and community organizations; employment and data research; corporate, textbook, and journal publications; liaison functions; and grants, funding, and donations. Most recently, the STC has also sponsored faculty internships in corporations as another way of making connections between academics and practitioners.

Certainly, the opportunities for collaboration have never been greater nor more important to the future of our profession for both practical and theoretic reasons.

INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE THROUGH COLLABORATION

For me, the motivation for helping develop this partnership had little to do with practical matters, although I am by nature a pragmatic person and although, as I alluded to previously, such partnerships can help departments solve problems related to insufficient staff, expertise, and budget in technical communication curricula. Rather, the partnership seemed an ideal way to do something that I have been trying to do in a number of ways over the decades—to meld theory and practice. Having been a professor for a decade and a consultant in business and industry for another decade and then a professor again for more than another decade (with some of those years overlapping), I have gained a good understanding of how both communities—the academic and the business communities—view the other and am therefore especially impassioned about the need to integrate these worlds. Much in these two cultures, however, militates against that integration. In fact, there is considerable dissension even within our academic community.

For example, in the last twenty years, since the Elizabeth Tebeaux (1980) and Elizabeth Harris (1980) exchanges in *College English,* the debates about whether theory or practice ought to drive our profession have occupied much of our time. In many ways, the debate today remains essentially the same, though framed in different terms: for example, whether technical writing is rhetorical or instrumental discourse (Miller 1996; Moore 1996) and whether students' first allegiance in the workplace ought to be to the organization's goals, through enculturation and assimilation (Tebeaux 1985), or to a sociopolitical agenda based on cultural criticism and change (Herndl 1993b; Johnson-Eilola 1996).

Added to the friction within our ranks is the gulf between those who teach in academe and those in the workplace (meaning, of course, the *other* workplace). A few years ago, George Hayhoe (1998) pointed out in *Technical Communication* that there seems to be a growing distrust between those who practice technical communication and those who teach and study it. Recently, Barbara Mirel and Rachel Spilka (2002) observed that industry relies very little on academic scholarship and that it has had "little or no impact on practice" (207). Essentially, the gap is, again, the old one between practice (knowing how) and theory (knowing what and why). At root, according to Stan Dicks (1999), the disconnect between academics and workplace professionals is due in part to the

very different worlds each group inhabits. As he contended in his presentation at the1999 annual conference of the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing, academicians are not particularly suited by character, temperament, working conditions, or professional incentives to get along with professionals in the workplace, let alone with each other.

However, if we are going to help bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the workplace and the academy, we are going to have to learn—not just study, write, and talk about—collaboration and to do it well ourselves. And this learning means more than simply inviting guest speakers from the "real world" to address our classes, incorporating client projects into our classrooms and assignments, or setting up advisory boards, internships, or shadowing programs. Although all of these approaches are important planks in building that bridge (and most of us have been involved in such initiatives), something more is needed if we are going to truly understand each other and enhance our mutual professional interests.

I suggest that rather than waging turf wars with practicing professionals as to the primacy of theory or practice, we begin to engage in what Barbara Couture (1998) calls a phenomenological rhetoric, where we are open to others' experiences and interpretations; what Richard Young, Alan Becker, and Kenneth Pike (1970) call Rogerian rhetoric; and what James Berlin (1993) calls transactional rhetoric, where the goal is not persuasion but understanding, learning, cooperation, and professional growth. For, as Hayhoe (1998) warns us, "Without cross-fertilization, both academe and industry face the prospect of sterility" (20).

OVERVIEW OF THE NIU/CHICAGO CHAPTER STC INSTITUTE

For the last eight years, I have been involved in one such effort at cross-fertilization: the development of the Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development (hereafter, simply "Institute"), now governed by a board of those from academe, business, and industry. For the past six years, Northern Illinois University (NIU) has partnered with the Institute to offer courses planned and taught by researchers, teachers, and practitioners of technical communication from several universities and companies. The courses feature the following attributes:

- All-day Saturday course sessions, taught off campus near business and industry

- A mix of course enrollees, including traditional university students and workplace professionals
- Team teaching and review of participants' work by those in academe and business/industry
- Real-world client projects as assignments
- Mentors from business and industry assigned to work with course participants
- Undergraduate or graduate credit or continuing education units (CEUs)

How the Institute Began

The Institute was initiated eight years ago when a few members of the education committee of the Chicago chapter STC, of which I was a member, decided to try developing a partnership of practicing professionals and area university professors to offer courses for those new or relatively new to the field of technical communication. After two years of planning and an STC grant to provide seed money, the Institute was ready to pilot two courses: Fundamentals of Technical Communication, for those with no prior experience or course work in technical communication, and Topics in Technical Communication, for those with either some prior coursework or experience. Since then, these two courses have been offered annually through Northern Illinois University.

What the Institute Is

Officially, the Institute is an entity of the Chicago chapter STC and, as such, reports directly to the chapter's administrative council and, through them, to STC headquarters. The charter for the Institute was written by the members of the Chicago chapter's Institute committee and was approved by the Chicago chapter's administrative council in August 1998. The charter sets forth the Institute's mission, structure, and operating parameters; its relationship with groups and individuals outside the Institute and STC; and the Institute's governing board and five directorship positions.

The goal of the Institute is to provide a unique educational program for both entry- and experienced-level professionals by offering courses in technical communication that integrate academic theory and practical application. This combination of research-based principles and hands-on practice lies at the heart of the Institute and is its whole *raison d'être*. When the Institute was conceived, its founders were mindful of creating courses not already available through either educational institutions or

vendors. If another group or school was already offering something similar or could do it better, then, we figured, there was no reason for us or the Institute to do it, too.

Affiliations

In support of this goal, the Institute may form relationships with individuals, academic institutions, consulting firms, and professional associations or organizations. From the beginning, the Institute was designed as a collaborative effort of teachers, researchers, and practicing professionals in the field of technical communication, and many individuals associated with the Institute have filled all three roles in their careers. In fact, it was just such a group of individuals who, while serving on the Chicago STC education committee, came up with the idea of the Institute in the first place. Now eight years later, the Institute carries on this tradition of collaboration at all levels—whether it is in the makeup of the board that governs the Institute; the instructors who design, plan, and team-teach the courses; or the course participants themselves, as they develop teamwork skills by working jointly on course projects and in-class application exercises.

Practitioners

Chicago has one of the largest STC chapters in the country and accordingly its members represent a wide range of businesses and organizations, big and small. The Institute invites those with the most experience and expertise to become instructors, mentors, panelists, or brown-bag speakers in its courses.

Underlying the Institute is the belief that there is no substitute for practical know-how. In the classroom, the practitioners bring the voice of experience to bear upon what might otherwise seem abstract theories, principles, and strategies. The practitioners can quickly draw upon a wealth of examples, stories, and case studies—all of which help establish the instructors' credibility and at the same time make the class more interesting and directly applicable to the participants' internships, client projects, and current or prospective jobs.

Academics

The Institute also encourages the involvement of those who teach, study, and research technical communication in colleges and universities. Thus far, individuals associated with DePaul University, Illinois Institute of Technology, Purdue University (Calumet), Illinois State University,

Northern Illinois University, and College of Lake County have served as instructors. Conceivably, the Institute board could extend its reach even farther and, perhaps someday, form a consortium among several schools.

In the practice/theory binary, if you think of the professional technical communicators upholding the practice end, then it is the academics—the professors, researchers, and scholars—who uphold the theory end. They are the ones whose job it is to study technical communication, to be familiar with the research, and to conduct the research—to find out not only what works and how it works (what the practitioners know best) but also why and in what situations it works, even to critically examine what we mean by "works"—a process that includes familiarity with the values underlying our actions and words, as well as their social and political implications.

Because the main goal of the Institute is to break down the practice/theory binary and remove the walls that separate the classroom and the workplace, the Institute screens its instructors carefully for those who understand the importance of informed practice on the one hand and grounded theory on the other. Thus, contrary to the old adage, "Those who can, do; and those who can't, teach," each of the instructors who teach for the Institute also has real-world experience, many as independent consultants. Others are former professors who have left academe to become full-time, corporate employees.

These, then, are the two main groups affiliated with the Institute. However, in terms of its mechanics and operations, there is another important player in this venture.

Partnership with Northern Illinois University

Since its beginning, the Institute has partnered with NIU. The reasons are many: some pragmatic, some economic, some ideological, and some personal, not the least of which is the fact that I am a professor at NIU and I also served on the original Chicago STC education committee from which the institute idea was conceived, on the subsequent Institute committee that developed it, and then as the first managing director of the Institute governing board.

Pragmatics. Most importantly, NIU gave the Institute courses an institutional home by providing me with some released time to serve as the course coordinator and by helping handle such administrative matters as course listings, registrations and records, credit, and course location. NIU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Department of English,

and the Office of External Programming have been exceptionally supportive of the partnership.

Technically, the Institute courses are NIU courses because they are offered through the university and appear in the schedule of courses. Unlike other university courses, the Institute-affiliated courses are offered for either undergraduate or graduate credit or for CEUs. Furthermore, the courses can be taken for a grade or pass/fail or may be audited. This flexibility in credit and grade options makes the courses attractive to a wide audience, including traditional university students seeking degrees, nontraditional students fulfilling professional growth requirements for their jobs, and those both seeking a degree and working full time. However, because the courses involve active participation and rigorous reading and writing assignments, few have elected the audit or CEU options in the last six years. Half of the spaces in the Institute courses are reserved for non-NIU students.

The maximum enrollment in each course is twenty-five (with the expectation that a few will drop before the course begins), and typically the courses have had waiting lists. Most of the participants enroll for graduate credit, and the majority of these are students-at-large (that is., nondegree graduate students at the time of enrollment), some of whom plan to transfer the credit to other universities, some of whom later apply for admission to our graduate or certificate program in professional and technical communication, offered through the English department.

Economics. Another reason for the appeal of the university partnership is sheer economics. Compared with the cost of vendor courses or with the tuition at private universities in the area, NIU's tuition is quite reasonable—anywhere from a half to a third of these other costs. Also, NIU pays an honorarium to all of the instructors and mentors associated with the Institute courses, although not to the brown-bag speakers or panelists. The honoraria are insignificant when compared with the consulting fees that these professionals normally command and when compared with the costs and difficulty of adding additional, full-time faculty.

On the Chicago chapter STC side of the ledger are some shared marketing, printing, and postage costs. However, these costs have declined as the Institute has moved much of its publicity and orientation materials to the NIU and the Chicago chapter STC Web sites. All five directors of the Institute board are volunteers from industry and academe.

How the Courses Are Structured

For six years, the Institute has offered two courses through NIU: Fundamentals of Technical Communication (FTC) in the spring and Topics in Technical Communication (TTC) in the fall. Although neither is a prerequisite for the other, the preferred sequencing would be to take the FTC course first and the TTC course second. If you are wondering why the more basic course would be offered in the second semester (spring) and not the first semester when the academic year begins, the answer is simple: to allow sufficient time in the fall to promote the spring FTC course, especially to market it to the current and prospective members of the Chicago STC. Summer is not a good time to advertise the course because most students and faculty are gone and because the Chicago STC doesn't hold chapter meetings or have newsletters in the summer.

Neither course is a tools course because those types of workshops (for example, RoboHELP, PageMaker, and Dreamweaver) are readily available in the Chicago area and, moreover, fall outside the Institute's purview. Since the Institute started, the courses have met in a "smart classroom," with an instructor podium well equipped with a computer, projection system, TVs, VCRs, and a direct connection to the Internet. To project their materials, most instructors either plug their laptops into the podium or bring Zip discs or CDs. In the past couple of years, especially now that NIU has a new suburban campus outfitted with the latest technology, many classes incorporate computer-lab sessions, interspersed as part of the small- group activities.

Typically, the class sessions involve a combination of lecture, discussion, and application exercises. In our orientation sessions with the instructional team and in our instructor guide, we stress the importance of student participation and interaction. The layout of the classrooms and computer labs facilitates this importance, with comfortable chairs that can be easily rolled to different tables or workstations. Also, the building in which the class is held has several other rooms and lounges to accommodate breakout groups.

For both courses, the Institute board prepares orientation materials and holds orientation sessions for new instructors. In the FTC course, there are also orientation materials and sessions for the mentors. In both courses, the Institute board works with the instructors to develop customized course materials. Because this course is STC affiliated, we

rely heavily upon articles from *Technical Communication* and *Intercom.* In each course, usually one or two textbooks are also required or recommended.

Because there is not space here to describe both courses in detail, I will spend more time on the first one, the FTC course, and will only gloss over the main features of the second one, the TTC course.

Fundamentals of Technical Communication (FTC) Course
The Fundamentals of Technical Communication (FTC) course is an introductory course designed for those new to the profession. It is offered for seven Saturdays from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. in a suburb of Chicago. The course has a maximum enrollment of twenty-five participants and carries either three semester-hour credits (at the undergraduate or graduate level) or four CEUs. It features a team of instructors, some from academe and some from business and industry, each team member responsible for a different topic and for teaching one of the Saturdays. In addition, a university faculty member (me in all FTC courses so far) coordinates the entire course, attends all sessions, and works with each course participant, along with that person's assigned mentor from business and industry. There are four mentors total, who work with five or six protégés each.

Course Topics. The FTC topics include an introduction to the profession and discipline of technical communication; basic skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success; writing clearly, concisely, and correctly; organizing and presenting information; usability testing; document design for paper and electronic media; and ethics and technical communication. Instructors of these sessions, who also receive advance copies of the participants' project proposals, are encouraged to make connections between their topics and the participants' client projects. During the last two Saturday mornings of the course, the participants give short oral presentations describing their projects, share what they learned from doing them, and suggest what they might do differently were they to do their projects now, knowing what they did not know before.

Scheduling. The FTC course begins in mid-March, when the official spring semester at NIU is half over. Although the FTC course skips the first half of the semester, by meeting all day for seven Saturdays we still log at least the same number of hours as a regular-semester NIU course: in our case, probably more than fifty total contact hours. These hours

include individual conferences before and after class and some brown-bag lunch sessions on topics requested by the course participants. The lunchtime speakers are other technical communicators and STC members who want to become involved in the Institute but with a minimal time commitment at this point.

Preliminary Contacts and Client Projects. As the course professor/coordinator, I correspond with all of the enrollees about a month before the course begins to explain the main requirements and to give them guidelines for finding a real-world client project to work on throughout the course, for conducting a client interview, and for writing a project proposal.

The types of projects span the spectrum of technical writing: from brochures and newsletters to manuals, formal reports, online documentation, and Web pages. Clients include present employers, friends, neighbors, clubs, churches, small companies, and large corporations—virtually anyone who has a genuine need to have something written. Projects developed for nonprofit organizations are especially encouraged because they carry low risks but high rewards—namely, the satisfaction of having volunteered one's services for a worthy cause. The participants are not paid for work done in conjunction with their course projects.

By the first session, each participant has submitted a project proposal and participant survey to me and the course mentors and instructors. The directors of our Institute board use these to match each course participant with one of the four mentors whom we have arranged to have work with them over the next seven weeks on both their client project and their professional development goals and plans. In addition to working with a mentor, each participant consults with me at various stages of the client project.

Electronic Journals. Another way in which the mentors and I stay in tune with the participants is through their electronic journals. Soon after each session, each participant sends the mentor and me reflections about the class and the preparatory readings. In these e-journal entries, which are intended to be spontaneous and candid, the participants also relate the specific day's topic to their client projects and career goals. Participants are encouraged to develop a personal inventory of the skills they think they need to develop to prepare themselves as technical communicators, as well as a plan for their professional growth. These e-journals

often become the springboard for topics of discussion during individual conferences with the instructors, mentors, or me; during panel presentations in class or brown-bag lunch sessions; or during informal chats over breaks and lunch. The bonding that occurs throughout the seven weeks is exceptional, to the extent that many participants continue to see each other and have even hired or contracted each other. Many have even asked the Institute to hold reunions, the first of which was held a couple of years ago during an FTC first-Saturday luncheon, followed by a panel of the FTC alums, now themselves employers, thereby completing the Institute circle.

Research-Related Projects. Finally, for those enrolled for graduate credit, another requirement is a research-related project, which may be done in conjunction with the main client project or may involve inquiry into another topic of importance to them and to the field of technical communication. Some have conducted primary research (mainly interviews or surveys), and others have done traditional, secondary research. We always encourage the participants to make their deliverables something of use to someone else (such as a report, feasibility study, or proposal for a company or organization; a book review or article for a journal), instead of the usual research paper that simply gets filed or tossed out once it has been turned in. We thereby reinforce the principal theory upon which the Institute is based: that writing is not an end product but an integral part of a process involving human interaction and that, accordingly, writing shapes as well as reflects our beliefs, behavior, attitudes, and institutions.

Evaluations. As NIU's instructor of record and as the course coordinator, I evaluate each project and am responsible for submitting final grades. In my assessment, however, I consult with the mentors to enlist their input.

As for evaluating each session and instructor, participants complete an evaluation form at the end of each session, copies of which are given to the respective instructor, as well as to the Institute board (and, thus, the Chicago chapter STC administrative council) and NIU. At the end of the course, participants also evaluate both the course as a whole and their mentors. And, finally, mentors and instructors evaluate their roles in the course and offer suggestions for improvement. The Institute board reviews each of these evaluations in its course planning for the following year.

Topics in Technical Communication (TTC) Course

The second course, offered each fall, is Topics in Technical Communication (TTC), which is designed for those with either some prior coursework in technical communication or some prior experience (one to three years). For those who may be interested in developing a similar course, perhaps apart from a two-course sequence like the FTC/TTC Institute offerings, I describe both how the TTC course used to be structured and how it is now structured.

Previous TTC Format. For the first couple of years, TTC was structured in much the same way as FTC: that is, for seven Saturdays and three credits (again, undergraduate or graduate credit or CEUs). The topics and instructors were different from those of the FTC course and usually changed each year. For example, during the first year, topics included Analyzing Business Needs and Developing Solutions; Planning and Managing Projects; Thinking Visually; Developing Online Documentation; Presenting Complex Information Verbally; and Employing Research Strategies for Corporate Projects. Subsequent years' topics included Design, Documentation, and the Product Life Cycle; Moving Documentation from Paper to Online; Information Modeling; Technical Editing; Web Design from the User Perspective; Interviewing Subject Matter Experts; Designing Newsletters; and Designing Computer-Based Training. Some topics spanned one and a half or two Saturdays, with the same instructor returning to class to review the work submitted during the interval. Other topics that did not have associated homework were covered in one-day or half-day sessions.

Current TTC Format. For the past three years, the TTC course has shifted to a modular format, offering four different minicourses, each on a different topic. Each module or minicourse lasts two Saturdays from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. with at least one Saturday in between to permit time for a written assignment based on the prior Saturday's lesson. Each minicourse is offered through NIU and carries one semester-hour credit at the undergraduate or graduate level or the equivalent CEUs. (No one to date, however, has chosen CEUs over university credits.) Like the FTC course, the TTC course is held at NIU's Chicago suburban location (in one of the main high-tech corporate corridors) and draws both traditional and nontraditional students (mainly working professionals). The enrollment maximum for each minicourse is twenty.

A different instructor plans and teaches each minicourse, and the minicourses are independent from each other. Thus, individuals can

enroll in one, two, three, or all four courses for an equal number of semester-hour credits, which can be applied to NIU's or, when permitted, to another institution's degree or certificate programs. As with the FTC course, the instructors are selected by the Institute board and hired by NIU as guest lecturers, who are paid an honorarium by our Office of External Programming. At NIU, this arrangement avoids having to maneuver through the administrative maze necessitated by hiring an adjunct or visiting professor (a process that can take up to two years). Thus, an NIU English department professor serves as the instructor of record for the minicourses. This person, who also happens to be the Institute's managing director (formerly me, now Philip Eubanks), coordinates the planning of the minicourses, along with the Institute board; corresponds with the instructors; reviews all of the written work submitted by the minicourse participants, which the minicourse instructor has assigned, evaluated, and graded; and completes the final grade sheets for all minicourses.

Finally, it is important to note that this change in the TTC format (from a required set of topics and credit hours over seven Saturdays to modular topics from which individuals could choose) was precipitated by surveys and focus groups involving the course participants themselves. Furthermore, before changing the format entirely, the Institute board planned and piloted only one such minicourse during a fall semester when the original TTC course format (seven Saturdays) was still in place. Because the pilot was well received, the Institute board decided to forgo the original format to permit greater flexibility of scheduling and variety of topics. The Institute continually tries to practice what it preaches in the courses: that the first principle of good communication is to meet the audience's needs.

BENEFITS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

As I hope is evident from this description, the partnership between the Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development and Northern Illinois University is meeting an educational need that has long been recognized by both academics and practitioners of technical communication: the need to integrate theory and practice. Because the Institute courses are planned and taught by a team of professors and practitioners and because the courses are incorporated into the undergraduate and graduate curricula of the university, they are intellectually

rigorous and pedagogically rich. In fact, some of the other colleges and universities whose professors are affiliated with the Institute are now examining the possibility of accepting the Institute courses for transfer credit into their own institutions. As a result, in the future the Institute may well develop into a consortium of many colleges, universities, businesses, industries, and not-for-profit organizations.

The private sector's matrix model of project management and cross-functional teams—of sharing resources, talent, and expertise—is already influencing education, and we have much to learn from it. Colleges and universities can no longer afford to both create and duplicate programs in technical communication. And even if we could, we would never be able to keep pace with the advancements on the professional-practitioner front. For some, the answer to educating future technical communicators is to develop distance-learning courses. Although I would be the first to admit that distance learning has its place in helping to provide educational access to great numbers of students in far-off locations, it cannot substitute for real-time, face-to- face, human interaction, collaboration, and situated learning such as that afforded by the type of partnership described here.

However, for my colleagues at institutions situated in more remote parts of this country, or other countries, I can easily fathom migrating the concept of the NIU/Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development to the Internet. Imagine it—a virtual consortium of top-notch professors, teachers, scholars, and practitioners collectively planning, teaching, conferencing, and mentoring in a cybercollaboratorium.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

For those in academe seeking to establish similar types of partnerships with professional organizations, I could write an entire book based on my experiences over the past eight years because there are so many things to consider and to avoid. But for those just starting out, I have a few important suggestions.

Network

Make connections with professional organizations to garner support for developing academe-industry alliances. Volunteer to become a member of their education committees. By affiliating with a professional organization or several of them, you have access to many practitioners who,

once they know of your genuine interest in their expertise, are likely to welcome the opportunity to collaborate with colleges and universities. These individuals may well become the instructors, mentors, and guest speakers in any cosponsored courses you develop in the future. Furthermore, with the support of a professional organization, you are less likely to encounter the politics, special interests, and indebtedness that usually accompany partnerships formed with individual corporations.

Find Stakeholders

At the same time you network, get buy-in from your home institution. Although it is sound practice to get the blessing of your department chair and colleagues, oftentimes support may be more readily forthcoming at the higher levels of an institution—from, for example, your dean, president, or provost. These individuals are often more receptive to academe-industry affiliations because such ventures help give the institution visibility, credibility, and currency among its stakeholders at the city, county, and state levels. At a time when colleges and universities are being held accountable for how well they help prepare the workforce, such programs and partnerships are likely to get a good hearing. Furthermore, such academe-industry collaborations are looked upon favorably by alumni and granting agencies and thus can become the stepping-stone to additional revenue.

Explore Existing Resources

Existing resources may be internal or external. Before launching into something grandiose, assess what you're getting into and who may be able to help in the enterprise. Internally, find out what other types of partnerships your institution is engaged in and the extent of the support being offered them—whether, for example, it's a matter of personnel, marketing, technology, or printing costs. Externally, find out what other institutions and professional organizations are doing or have done. It may well save you a lot of time and frustration, and it may help provide you with other ideas and models.

Analyze the Partnership's Audience and Purpose

Although this analysis should be a no-brainer for us, it's surprising how often the obvious gets overlooked. This is not the time for a "build-it-and-they-will-come" approach. Survey the target audience to determine

the level of interest and preferences for such things as course topics, structure, location, days, and times to ensure that what you're creating reflects genuine needs. Then reassess your assumptions periodically. Also, clarify what the respective partners stand to gain and lose in the arrangement. And, of course, commit as much as possible to writing (document, document, document) to clarify roles and responsibilities and to avoid confusion and misunderstanding later on. The NIU/Chicago Chapter STC Institute began with mail and telephone surveys of the Chicago chapter STC membership.

Set Priorities

Realize that setting up a partnership such as the one I described takes a considerable amount of time and effort, which will have to come from somewhere—unfortunately, usually from one's research unless it is possible to turn the partnership project into a research-related venture. Multilevel collaborating can be time consuming. The greater the number of people involved, the richer, and potentially more frustrating, the enterprise. Such projects have a way of either spiraling out of control or losing momentum unless carefully planned in stages. In the beginning, it's far better to develop a pilot course and test, than to create a full-blown program. KISS (Keep It Simple and Succinct) is still the best advice.

The NIU/Chicago Chapter STC Institute for Professional Development is not a one-size-fits- all partnership, but I hope that it will inspire those affiliated with other technical communication programs to consider the benefits of thinking creatively about ways to involve practicing professionals and other academics in planning and implementing collaborative courses. Partnerships are one way that professional organizations can help promote education and the profession; that colleges and universities can conserve resources by tapping into a rich reservoir of talent and expertise; and that faculty, students, and practitioners alike can expand their knowledge, skills, and opportunities. It can be win/win situation for everyone.

Anna Miller. The directors of the current Institute governing board are Philip Eubanks, Managing Director; Brian Everett, Faculty Director; Roger Graves, Curriculum Director; Jaysa Jackson, Marketing Director; and Jennifer Kroll, Administrative Director.