



Technical Communicators as Researchers, Information Architects, and Cognitive Scientists Informing Global Communications and Interdisciplinary Contexts

Interview: Kirk St.Amant, Ph.D., Louisiana Technical University

Article By: Jennifer Roth Miller and Jessica Lynn Campbell, Ph.D. Students,

University of Central Florida

(jenniferrothmiller@knights.ucf.edu and jessicalynn@embarqmail.com)

Dr. Kirk St.Amant, Professor and the Eunice C. Williamson Endowed Chair in Technical Communication at Louisiana Technical University (USA), visited the University of Central Florida (UCF) campus on April 11, 2017, to speak with students and faculty in the Texts and Technology Doctoral Program, as well as to perform other on-site activities. Texts and Technology Ph.D. students, Jennifer Roth Miller and Jessica Campbell, were fortunate to be able to sit down and discuss with Dr. St.Amant some of the emerging trends in the field of technical communication and gain insight on how the profession and discipline have changed in the past few decades, as well as gain perspectives on the future of the field. The breadth of Dr. St.Amant's career is evidence of how technical communication informs many other interdisciplinary areas, such as international, health, academic, and citizen communication. Dr. St.Amant discussed unique opportunities where the evolving role of a technical communicator adds value and scholarship to the increasingly globalized and interdisciplinary world.

While Dr. St.Amant offered a great deal of knowledge from his years of experience in the field, as a professor of technical communication, and from his research on global audiences and international communication, a few reoccurring themes emerged during the the course of the conversation. The amount of information and speed with which information can be accessed creates shifts in the role of a technical communicator from a writer to a researcher with many accompanying functions. Instead of creators of original content, technical communicators, today, are information architects, whereby they find, organize, and repurpose content to distribute in a variety of increasingly participatory channels. Dr. St.Amant describes this process as the "Four Ss:" search, source, sift, and share, which is to find and vet reputable and accurate information, restructure, and finally, distribute content to specific audiences. The changing roles of the technical communicator reflect simultaneous shifts in power structures guiding audience participation.

A significant focus on global audiences, social media, user context, and enhanced opportunities for dialogue will continue to influence the work and practice of technical communicators. These changes have afforded users a more equal role in information creation, design, and use. Demand for information and the speed by which information must be delivered have increased as the user has become a real-time participant. Often, technical communicators must deliver information via social media platforms, such as instructional videos on YouTube accessed through a Smartphone while on the go. In return, technology consumers increasingly engage in an exchange economy for this information, access, comfort, and convenience. An unspoken threshold for access guides what users are willing to trade, and typically privacy and data rather than money are exchanged for convenience, speed (time), comfort, and

complimentary access. In effect, these processes establish an exchange economy, whereby consumers exchange the right to their information for quick, easily accessible content. Effective technical communicators today attend to these motivations and progressively meet users on the platforms they already use and have agreed to their terms of exchange. Across the interdisciplinary topics of our conversation, this theme of an exchange economy consistently applied.

Additionally, Dr. St. Amant explained how the changing role of a technical communicator increasingly includes lessons from cognitive science. Script theory, states Dr. St. Amant, can be used as an important theoretical lens for navigating rapidly changing digital, cultural, contextual, and interdisciplinary information environments. Humans use cognitive blueprints, called scripts, when encountering familiar, constructed social situations. Scripts encompass the actors, props, interactions, and dialogue that have been socially standardized for any particular situation. For instance, when individuals encounter a hostess/host, server, menu, and expected dialogue at a restaurant, diners enter into an automated mode, whereby they execute the scripted dialogue and behaviors for that situation. This, in effect, enables humans to multitask and reserve mental power. Script theory, therefore, can helpfully inform the design, development, and technical communication for any purpose and in any given context. These scripts are what people do or expect automatically and most importantly, these scripts generally differ across cultural lines; therefore, across disciplines, physical borders, and contexts, products and communication can benefit from aligning with the culturally prescribed scripts. Ethnography and interviews then become extremely important data collection methods in the design, development, and user testing of products and technical communication. Applying script theory in other interdisciplinary contexts, such as in the development of health communications, also benefit from understanding users, the scripts they initiate, and their need for information. Furthermore, working to understand geographic scripts allows technical communicators to effectively bridge into global audiences.

Dr. St. Amant, who holds an appointment at the University of Limerick (Ireland) in International/Intercultural Medical and Health Communication, delved further into exploring the social constructions inherent in health, medicine, and care. All three concepts involve data. “Medical,” refers the kind of data collected such as a patient’s pulse or weight. Alternately, measuring, “health,” involves the analytical method of creating meaning from raw data, usually by comparing data measurements to accepted norms. Norms or averages, of course, vary by culture and context. Finally, the term, “care,” encompasses the actions taken after data is analyzed in an effort to maintain health at or return health to a certain standard based on what society deems is a healthy state. Thus, health communication depends greatly on these cultural constructs. The design and development of health communication and products across cultures requires consideration of these conceptions, as well as the cultural scripts initiated in the medical and healthcare context.

Lastly, Dr. St. Amant touched on several aspects of academia—from developing critical information literacies in students to the citizens of the broad community. Dr. St. Amant highlighted an important role in communicating the work of academics, or rather, sharing the knowledge gained in academia with citizens in a variety of public contexts. Critical literacies became a focal point in the development of this conversation. One way to foster and develop critical literacies in technology and information consumers is to affect the upcoming generations through university curriculum. However, this excludes large portions of the population—those who have not or will not be captured in the university system and those generations that studied prior to the significant changes in information

consumption afforded by digital technologies. Regardless, academia holds an opportunity to reach beyond the walls of the academy by engaging in community outreach. Differing from marketing, community outreach features academics engaging with citizens in activities such as workshops at local community meeting places (local libraries) to discuss critical information literacies.

Understanding how technology consumers access, use, and transform information, via the exchange economy described earlier, is an essential aspect of technical communication today, and is guided by script theory. Technical communicators can develop better information, interactions, and usability by working with and learning local and cultural information consumption scripts. Dr. St.Amant predicts technical communicators and academics in technical communication will work in increasingly globalized and interdisciplinary contexts (international health and community outreach for example). Script theory and critical literacies offer useful theoretical approaches for technical communicators to bridge changing digital, cultural, interdisciplinary, and contextual information environments in the 21st century and beyond.

A grand thank you to Dr. St.Amant for visiting UCF, and for sharing his knowledge and expertise with UCF students, staff, and faculty.