Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

Summer 2016

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President's view

I've been thinking a lot about the 'c' word recently, but rather than launch straight into that particular topic, I thought it would be prudent to start at the beginning and build up gradually.

Just what is an institute?

We're an institute, but what does that mean? Someone asked me a few months ago when we'd been 'granted' institute status, and I was surprised by the question. I know chartered status has to be applied for and granted – but institute? So I did a bit of investigating. First, the most straightforward definition I found is:

> *An organization having a particular purpose, especially one that is involved with science, education, or a specific profession.[1]*

OK, now we know what an institute is, can any organisation claim to be one?

Well, I have seen statements on the websites of other institutes that they have been 'granted' institute status, but actually have found more information about 'permission to use the word' institute in a name rather than the granting of a status:

> *Approval to use this word is normally only given to fully functioning established organisations that operate under a different name. The range of activities may vary but institutes are organisations that typically undertake research at the highest level or are professional bodies of the highest standing.[2]*

As we were formed by amalgamation of three other bodies, two of which were already 'institutes',[3] that makes sense.

How many of us are scientists?

Something that has been raised at various points in the past – and again quite recently – is what has happened to the 'S' in ISTC. It's an interesting question, and one I struggle to answer, so would be interested in your views.

One of the 'criticisms' (or maybe not, depending on what area you work in) is that the ISTC focuses a lot on the documentation of software.

That may be true, but nearly all the work I've done over the years has been in 'software for the xxx industry', and I consider the 'xxx industry' bit to be as important as the 'software' part. For example, my business has done work with an organisation that I would class as 'scientific', and I didn't understand half of what Andrew, my son, was documenting – but it was still software used by that industry.

When *you* think about the 's', are you thinking of science writers (explaining the global warming theories[4] to the general public, for example, as in the Spring 2016 issue of *Communicator*) or are you thinking about people who write *for scientists* (for example, giving instructions for using an electron microscope or – dare I say it – simulation software for scientific models in fields such as oceanography, geology and astrophysics). I've always assumed we are more connected with the latter, but that is only my personal experience and it would be interesting to hear your views.

What sort of 'technical' are you?

Whenever I'm talking about what I do, or am teaching technical writing, I start by asking what 'technical' means to the people I'm with. The first answers usually refer to computers, IT in general or maybe machinery and other equipment. Then the responses start to broaden: Is accountancy a technical subject? What about medicine? The law? Education? Insurance? Astronomy? Personally, I find this definition the most useful:

> *Relating to a particular subject, art, or craft, or its techniques.[5]*

I've also had enquiries from people who perceive the 'technical' part very differently! They will provide the content – the words, the images and so on – but don't know how to use <insert application of choice>.[6] Basically,

they don't so much want a technical communicator as an application technician. I don't have a problem with this if I'm happy to put my name to the finished product – it's when what I'm being asked to produce contradicts every best-practice principle we adhere to that I start to object.

We're all 'communicators', aren't we?

Finally, we get to the 'c' word. In our institute's name, this is 'communicators', and there have been a few comments (grumbles) lately about how bad the ISTC is at communicating.

When I see a piece of not-perfect (written) communication, my heart sinks. Not because of the communication – I understand it and I recognise the constraints of time and technology under which it was generated – but because I know some readers will notice the 'room for improvement' rather than concentrating on the message. I agree wholeheartedly that we should strive to set an example, and we do our best – but unfortunately often the issues surrounding formatting of online communication aren't apparent until after the item has been published.

So, if we're all communicators, what distinguishes a good one from a bad one? Well, once again, the detail probably depends on your point of view, but it can be summarised as 'communicating clearly and appropriately'. Communication, though, is one of those words that doesn't imply direction: you not only have to be a good speaker, but a good listener; not only a good writer but a good reader.

You may have heard of the term 'active listening', which is not just sitting there quietly and letting the sound wash over you, but considering what is being said, making (sometimes internal) observations and connections, understanding the wider context. We may even pride ourselves on being good 'active listeners'.

How many of us, though, practice 'active reading', taking notice of the various emails, articles, forum posts and so on informing us of changes at work or to services we use? Banks and other financial providers send out a lot of information – yet still we look blankly at a statement and wonder why a particular charge has 'suddenly appeared'.

It shouldn't be a surprise to any of us that only a small percentage of what is written is read and retained. But for some reason, when it's us doing the reading and (lack of) retaining, we perceive it as a failure on behalf of the sender. I wonder why that is? C

References

1 Oxford Dictionaries 'Definition of institute in English' www.oxforddictionaries.com/ definition/english/institute (accessed April 2016)

2 Companies House (2016) 'Incorporation and names' www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/511065/GP1_Incorporation_and_Names_March_2016_v5_5-ver0.34.pdf, page 46 (accessed April 2016)

3 See History of the ISTC at www.istc.org.uk/about-the-istc/history-of-the-istc, and for more detail read the full account. (Accessed April 2016)

4 Clabon T, Elazab W and Singer W (2016) 'Green Technology' Communicator, Spring 2016: 37-43

5 Oxford Dictionaries 'Definition of technical in English' www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/technical (accessed April 2016)

6 This may be Word, but is more likely to be one of the technical authoring applications such as Adobe Captivate, MadCap Flare or Author-It.

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Area groups

The ISTC area groups offer an opportunity for technical communicators to network and share knowledge and expertise. The groups are open to everyone from all industries in the local area (you don't even need to be an ISTC member to attend), and it's free. The groups meet at intervals during the year and hold talks, peer discussions, demonstrations and social evenings. Special interest groups give you an opportunity to meet people in your own industry.

Interested in attending?
If you're interested in attending please contact the local organiser or email istc@istc.org.uk

Interested in setting up a group?
Please email Tom Dumic
E: areagroupsmanager@istc.org.uk

LinkedIn (LI) groups
There are a number of ISTC groups:
Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators www.linkedin.com/groups/1858546
ISTC Community www.linkedin.com/groups/8440733

England
Cambridge
Organisers: Derek Cooper, Jeff Bronks
E: cambridge_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: Cambridge Technical Communicators

London
Organiser: David Farbey
E: london_areagroup@istc.org.uk

Midlands
Organiser: John Burns
E: midlands_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: ISTC Midlands Area Group

North East England
Organiser: Janine Weightman
E: northeastengland_areagroup@istc.org.uk

North West England
Organiser: David Jones
E: northwestengland_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: ISTC NW Area Group

Southern
Organiser: Marjorie Jones
E: southernengland_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: Southern Area Group

Thames Valley
Organiser: Darren Mitcham
E: thamesvalley_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: Thames Valley Area Group

Yorkshire
Organiser: Nick Tonge
E: yorkshire_areagroup@istc.org.uk

Wales
South Wales
Organiser: John Espirian
E: southwales_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: South Wales Group

Scotland
East of Scotland
Organiser: George Lewis
E: eastscotland_areagroup@istc.org.uk

West of Scotland
Organiser: Charles Addison
E: westscotland_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: West of Scotland Area Group

Ireland
Irish Group
Organiser: Adrian Rush
E: irishgroup@istc.org.uk

Irish Technical Writers — an ISTC area group
Organisers: Patrice Fanning, Yvonne Cleary, Bridget Walsh
E: irishtechnicalwriters@istc.org.uk
LI: Irish Technical Writers--An ISTC Area Group

Special interest groups
MadCap
Organisers: Marjorie Jones, Tom Brindley, Kai Weber
E: MadSIG@istc.org.uk
LI: MadCap UK & Europe Users Group

ISTC business affiliates

www.istc.org.uk/business-affiliates
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MadCap Software www.madcapsoftware.com

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Firehead http://firehead.net
Geo Language Services www.geolanguages.co.uk
Godiva www.godiva.co.uk

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PSBT (Polskie Stowarzyszenie Biur Tłumaczeń) www.psbt.pl
University of Portsmouth www.port.ac.uk