IMPLEMENTING A TECHNICAL WRITING PROGRAM:
THE ALGONQUIN EXPERIENCE

Barry Barclay

Editor's Note:
The following is a summary of Barry Barclay's address to
the National Conference, Guelph. Shortly after, he
accepted the opportunity of beginning graduate studies
in Texas and has been too busy to expand the summary into
an article. This information, however, merits presenta­
tion because Algonquin's diploma program was the first in
Canada designed specifically to train technical writers.

Further details may be obtained by writing:
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In 1982 industry's need for competent technical writers surfaced at
a meeting between Algonquin College personnel and representatives of
high technology firms in the Ottawa area. Subsequent meetings estab­
lished that the marketplace could absorb 20 to 25 new writers every
year; as a result, an Ad Hoc Advisory Committee was established in
early 1982 to describe the structure and content of an appropriate
technical writing program.

The committee decided on a 3 year (6-semester) plan. Students would
take the first 3 of these 6 semesters in one of the regular technology
programs (preferably Computer Science or Electronics) and transfer to
the Technical Writer Program for their last 3 semesters. The committee
specified the content of these final 3 Technical Writer semesters,
expressed their confidence in being able to offer summer jobs in the
technical writing field, and began the process of obtaining provincial
approval of the program.

In late November of 1983 the program was approved by Ontario's
Council of Regents, with the proviso that the number of Technical
Writer semesters be expanded from three to four.

During the next few weeks 20 students were recruited for the first
(4th semester) class, and the program began early in January 1984.
Individual testing and interviewing ensured that only applicants with
highly developed writing skills were accepted.

Of the 20 students, 13 were direct entries from outside Algonquin
College; most of these possessed advanced qualifications, typically
an Engineering or Bachelor of Science degree. Virtually all students
turned out to be strongly motivated and extremely competent.

Curriculum design was based on one highly pragmatic (and unattainable)
objective: to graduate technical writers whose need for on-the-job
training would be zero. Of the 26 classroom hours per week, 14 hours
were devoted to communication skills (including technical writing,
graphic design, and word processing); the remaining 12 hours were
given over to technical subjects (statistics, microprocessor design,
and computer architecture).

During this first semester it became clear that the economic reces­
sion would eliminate many of the summer work positions more or less
guaranteed by companies represented on the Advisory Committee. How­
ever, 16 of the 19 remaining students found summer work as technical
writers; of these, 4 are self-employed in a company they formed them­
selves. Feedback from employers is extremely positive: they have
favourably compared the performance of the Algonquin students with
the performance of experienced writers hired recently for full-time
positions.

ALGONQUIN COLLEGE - TECHNICAL WRITER PROGRAM

AD HOC ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Algonquin College - Computing Science/Electronics Department
Algonquin College - English Department

Atomic Energy of Canada Limited
Bell-Northern Research
Computing Devices of Canada Limited
Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources
Mitel Corporation
The NABU Network
S&S Software Limited
The Society for Technical Communication
Systemhouse Limited
PROGRAM STRUCTURE

AS PROPOSED - 1982

1st YEAR

- SEMESTER 1
  (Common to all programs)

- SEMESTER 2
  (Specialization in a technology)

2nd YEAR

- SEMESTER 3
  (Specialization in a technology)

- SEMESTER 4
  (Technical Writer)

3rd YEAR

- SEMESTER 5
  (Technical Writer)

- SEMESTER 6
  (Technical Writer)

AS APPROVED - 1983

1st YEAR

- SEMESTER 1
  (Common to all programs)

- SEMESTER 2
  (Specialization in a technology)

2nd YEAR

- SEMESTER 3
  (Technical Writer)

- SEMESTER 4
  (Technical Writer)

3rd YEAR

- SEMESTER 5
  (Technical Writer)

- SEMESTER 6
  (Technical Writer)

PERMANENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Bell-Northern Research
Gandalf Data Limited
Mitel Corporation
The NABU Network
NIVA Writing Services Limited
S&S Software Limited
The Society for Technical Communication
Systemhouse Limited

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

1st Semester
- Communication I
- Mathematics I
- Chemistry I
- Electricity I

2nd Semester
- Communication II
- Introduction to Calculus
- Passive Circuits
- Pascal

3rd Semester
- Technical Communication I
  Concepts in Mathematics
  Data Processing
  Assembly and Production
  Systems

4th Semester
- Technical Communication II
  Statistics
  Microprocessor A
  Basic Computer Architecture

5th Semester
- Technical Communication III
  Document Planning
  Business Management
  Project Planning

6th Semester
- Technical Communication IV
  Document Management II
  Engineering Systems
  Law
STUDENT PROFILE

1. TOTAL RECRUITED: 20
   DROP OUTS: 1

2. SOURCES OF RECRUITMENT:
   7 transferred from within the College
   13 applied as direct entries

3. EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL WRITERS: 8

4. DEGREES OR DIPLOMAS HELD: 13
   Diploma, Electrical Engineering: 1
   Diploma, Computer Programming: 2
   Diploma, Radio and TV Arts: 1
   Engineering degree and/or P.Eng.: 3
   Bachelor of Science: 4
   Bachelor of Journalism: 1
   Bachelor of Commerce: 1

5. PERSONAL PROFILE:
   11 married, 9 single
   15 male, 5 female
   Age: 23-24 6
   25-28 10
   over 28 4

WRITING A CANADIAN ADAPTATION

Dixie Stockmayer


In May 1982, when I accepted an invitation to prepare a Canadian adaptation of the Huseman et. al text, Business Communication, I was unprepared for what lay before me over the next two years: deadlines that seemed reasonable when I agreed to them initially rushed by; a task that I anticipated might take three or four hours would take three or four times as long; changes which appeared easy were not. However, I believe that the product justifies the planning and hard work which the adaptation required.

PLANNING THE ADAPTATION

The obvious changes required in the Canadian adaptation were, of course:
- the use of the metric system
- the replacement of American spellings, usage, and examples with Canadian material

However, I was also asked to review the text to identify its major strengths and weaknesses with specific reference to:
1. the coverage given to particular topics or areas
   - should the coverage of certain topics be expanded? abbreviated? or deleted?
   - should new topic areas be expanded?
2. the number and nature of the examples in the original text
   - are there sufficient examples?
   - to what extent are specifically Canadian examples or applications needed?