

First Experiences as a Technical Communicator In America

by Huatong Sun

Do you remember me? Last October I wrote an article for *TechniScribe* talking about Chinese technical communication. At that time I wish to study for technical communication in America. My dream is coming true now ---- I am studying in the MS program of Rhetoric & Technical Communication at Michigan Technological University! Sometimes I feel our life is woven with surprise. If I hadn't run into technical communication field by chance, I would have never known how interesting the field is, and I wouldn't study in America at the present. As a technical communicator in America, life is somewhat beyond my thoughts.

People don't know what we're doing

This spring when I decided to come to MTU, my friends always asked me such questions: "What does technical communication mean? What are you doing in this field?" I didn't feel surprised since there is few technical communication program in China. However, I never thought the official in the Shanghai Consulate would also ask me these questions. Usually he will ask the F-1 visa applicant some questions about his or her field to make sure the applicant will really study in America. But things were different when he asked me about it. He pointed the "Rhetoric" in my I-20 form and asked what the "Rhetoric" in my program meant. Even after I used my limited understanding to explain to him, he still thought it interesting and showed my I-20 form to another official as a novelty. I guess I looked dumbfounded at that time for I hadn't thought before that even Americans seldom hear about this field. What a surprise!

Now I didn't feel surprised any more when the Houghton Transit Bus-driver told me that he thought I was a translator when I told him I studied technical communication at MTU: a translator is also a technical communicator and maybe one day I'll really be a translator, to translate American documents into Chinese, or to translate Chinese documents into English. Nor did I feel surprised to some American students' complaints: the outsiders don't know what they're doing and often ask them what RTC means in the job interviews. But it's really amazing to me that recent *US News & World Reports* said technical writer will be among the twenty hot job tracks in the future! Anyway, it's a piece of encouraging news.

A TA in first year writing course

I haven't imagined that I would give English writing course to American freshmen in the third week of my stay here; please don't forget that my previous major is Chinese literature! However, life is full of challenges and we can't evade it when it comes. In the orientation week, some American students asked me whether I felt nervous to teach for the first time. I told them frankly that I had no feeling at the present, one exclaimed in surprise: "Oh, she is shocked!" Of course I wasn't shocked but I feel really surprised to the fact that American academia pays so great importance to this course. We don't have such a course in China. University freshmen are taken for granted that they have enough writing skills when they enter colleges---- of course it's not the truth sometimes.

To be a TA in the first year writing course, I think I am really a technical communicator now, not only in a theoretical way but in a professional way as well. I like this feeling. At MTU, we teach

students how to write a deliberative writing paper through a writing developing process from paper 1 to paper 3. It's my first time to hear about it. The way to help students develop their ways of thinking through their writing process is very interesting. In my course I try to choose some interesting topics to sparkle students' thoughts. It's a happy moment to see how a student develops his ideas from one step to another step. The most fascinating fact in this course is that TA will have a chance to choose his or her own textbook after teaching one year of this course: s/he can share her or his research interests with the students. Some TA in my department chose gender issue as a theme in her instruction. Though it's a bit crazy to ask an 18-year-old freshman to think of men's lives in a feminist perspective, who knows what will happen? Maybe some great ideas will jump from there. So many possibilities in this course, perhaps this is why many TAs like to teach first year writing course. I wonder what theme I will choose next year...

What technical communication means in America

As soon as I entered this program, I noticed an interesting contrast. The Humanities Department, it sounds so ancient a department; the Rhetoric and Technical Communication program, it sounds so modern a program. However, the Humanities Department houses the RTC program. This arouses me great curiosity: what result will it be combining the ancientness and the modernness? Moreover, this story doesn't only happen here. In other universities, such as the University of Minnesota, the STC program and RSTC program are in the department of Rhetoric, which also looks very ancient. I guess technical communication field has developed from traditional arts field--- English, Writing and so on, this is why it has both ancientness and modernness. Has this contrast brought some specialty to this field? I haven't got my conclusion yet, but it seems obvious that the technical communication field in America is different from what Chinese technical communicators think of it.

Some of the difference maybe lies behind the language. For example, how do we translate "technical" into Chinese? There are two meanings in this word: one is professional and another is scientific. I can't find one Chinese word to include the two meanings simultaneously. If I translate it into professional, Chinese people will think technical communication is just some kind of practical skills. If I put it into scientific, people will think technical communication is a new branch of communication studies concerning technology. Each of them just tells half of the story. I asked this question to an RTC PhD student who has learned Chinese for some years. He shrugged to me and replied in a very rhetorical way: "OK, it depends on your audience. Translate it as you wish." Perhaps because we don't have a Chinese word to express the meaning of professional and scientific at the same time, Chinese scholars have just got half of the concept of technical communication as American: they show more interest in research of scientific communication. Usually in China those who do research in scientific communication field are beginning to regard themselves as technical communicators, while most people who are doing technical communication work in the industry, business, service organizations or government have never heard of technical communication yet. Is it strange?

Now I'm just a Dull Tom, accurately, Dull Mary. However, there are so many surprises in the life: I don't know what new thing will happen ahead. It's nice to be a technical communicator in America.

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