

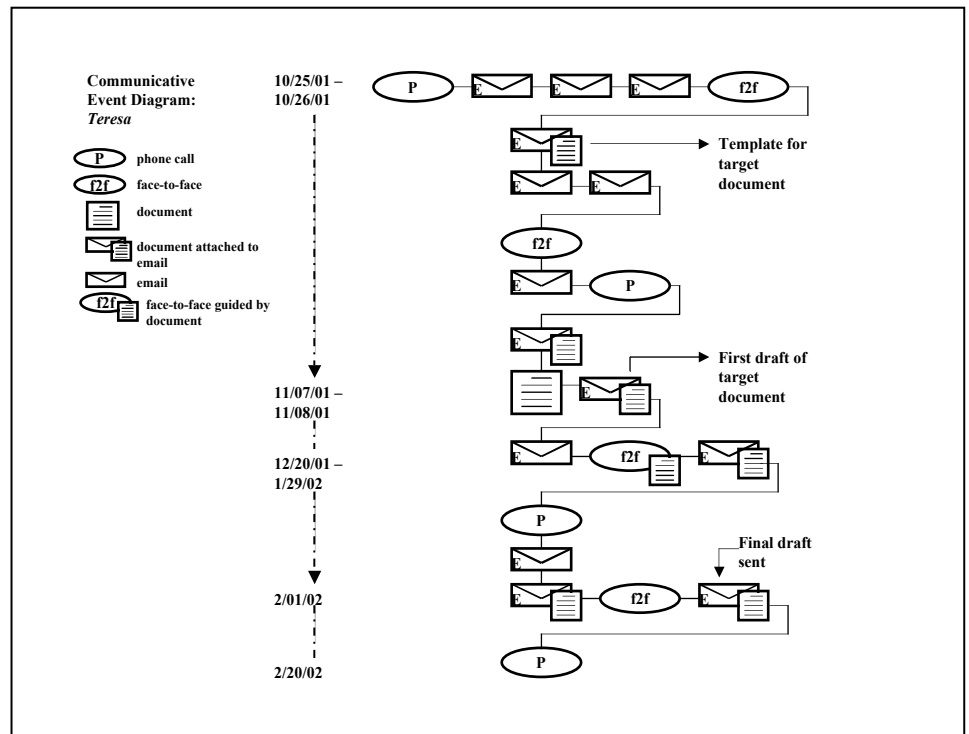
Reconsidering the Basics of Technical Writing: What are the Basic Units of a Quality Writing Project?

This paper began as a reflection upon on research from two recent studies I have conducted on team and individual writing projects (Hart-Davidson, 2002; Hart-Davidson, 2003). These projects raised two curricular questions for me that I think are relevant to technical and professional writing programs:

1. Workplace writing research has shown that a fact we may intuitively understand about good workplace writing projects - that they involve the coordination of many communication events, oral and written, in several genres - is true (eg. Cross, 2002; Spilka, 1990). Why then do we not consider "communication events" the basic unit when we define "quality" in technical and professional writing?
2. Should we move more definitively away from defining "good writing" as a set of qualities that inhere in a single text, and towards a definition that takes a broader view of communicative activity involved in producing a quality outcome? How?

Technical and professional writing programs seemingly acknowledge the logic of these two questions when they move to incorporate case-based learning, client consulting projects, and other complex, multi-stage work. But when it comes to evaluating this work, the questions above arise.

As a first step towards answering these questions, consider the visualization of a workplace writing project at left, meant to be resource for reasoning about the quality of writing practices. The visualization depicts a whole writing project by showing the individual communication events that occurred, storing useful event attributes such as who initiated each, which team members were involved, what the purpose for each was, etc. as event metadata. Sorting the events using these attributes allow for different visualizations, each of which can help to reveal useful information about the project, including information about the quality of the outcome and the patterns of activity that may have been responsible for producing a quality outcome.



Such views of writing projects suggest that "quality writing" is something that involves, but is not limited to the quality of the outcome of a writing project, i.e. a well-written manual, or a usable

help system. Achieving "quality documentation," for example, involves at least four important criteria:

1. Product quality as measured in the end product (e.g. a well written manual; a usable help system)
2. Customer/user satisfaction as measured by end product ratings or satisfaction measures related to the user experience
3. Team satisfaction as measured by self-evaluation
4. Innovation, as measured by a significant increase in any of the three categories without a corresponding dip in the others

I am involved in a project, along with colleagues Mark Zachry & Clay Spinuzzi, to understand how writing teams achieve items 1-3, and to understanding how they innovate by making significant "leaps" in any of these quality measures (Spinuzzi, Hart-Davidson, & Zachry, 2004). This sort of understanding clearly requires a view of the whole process. The question that arises for our programs, though, is how do we present such process views to students? When?

I would like to suggest that we start by considering a "communication event" as the basic unit for understanding quality writing. Teaching technical communication in this way would change the view of writing projects typically held by students and professional practitioners alike. The standard approach to planning and carrying out a project involves understanding a project as a series of tasks culminating in a written product. But tasks, in knowledge work situations, are made up of communication events - sometimes a great many of them distributed across multiple team members. Communication events have both project-related content and organizationally valuable form (genre) in a way that "tasks" do not, such that any one event or a string of events can be meaningfully redeployed in similar situations or repurposed, if need be, for novel situations. In other words, projects modeled as series of communication events provide the kinds of resources for learning that we frequently champion in technical communication pedagogies, serving as both plans for an overall quality experience as well as resources for achieving end-product quality in future projects. And perhaps most importantly, seeing projects as composed of communication events allows us to see the full range of communicative work that must be done in order for a text viewed as a "deliverable" to develop and succeed.

Works Cited

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