Memorandum

December 12, 2003

TO: Mr. Jeff Grabill, Instructor
FROM: Mr. Chad O'Neil, Student
SUBJECT: Workplace Study Report

**Introduction**

A workplace study was given as one of the assignments for Advanced Technical Writing. To complete the workplace study I visited ResComp: a University of Michigan department that runs residential computing. The following report will cover the methods used for conducting research, detail findings, and present the recommendations of the study.

The goal of my workplace study was to get a better idea of writing that I knew went on in ResComp when I was a part of it, but was not visibly. I spent time in the study catching up with many of the full time staff that I used to work with, finding out what projects they were working on, meeting and talking to the new staff members. After doing all these things and emails with you I had a clear idea of what writing I could examine in detail to fulfill the goal of my workplace study. This report details the methodology I used to conduct various levels of research to reach the goal of the study. The methodology section will include information on how spoke to staff, found out what projects they were working on, decided on workplace writing to study, and developed questions about that writing. Findings include the projects that were going on and staff, especially Deb’s, perception of their work. My recommendation, as a result of this study, is why and how training documentation could be developed more collaboratively.

**Methodology**

After working with and for the established ResComp staff for over three years I had formed close working relationships with many if not most of them. Not only did I hope by spending some time catching up with them to preserve these relationships, but also wanted to make sure to subtly communicate the value I put in these relationships so as to ease the question and answer sessions that were a part of discovering what projects were going on. Though I envisioned these conversations happening before finding out what staff members were working on, many of these conversations naturally moved into the projects established staff members were working on.
Catching up with and asking established staff what projects they were working on took much of my time; however, I did have a chance to meet the new administrative assistant Kelly. Although I did not have time to ask her directly what she had done and was doing as a new hire I did get some interesting information about her possible experience in the workplace from Deb Chang. Though, there are many new student employees due to the time I chose to visit (1 pm to 4 pm) there were very few students working.

Deb Chang was the first person I actually asked about what they were working on. The main reason for this was because she had started working for ResComp about a year before I graduated. By this time I had already made a niche for myself in the organization and did not have much chance to benefit from her work as Tech Team Coordinator. Our initial conversation was brief. Even so, I could keep my mind off training as I asked other staff about projects and learned about the many interesting and involving projects that were going on. The main reason I chose to spend some extra time speaking with Deb before leaving was that Training seemed like a project that would only involve people within ResComp so they would be easily accessible in the time I have to do the study. With these things in mind I decided to continue investigating training and the writing it involved. The documents Deb is preparing for training is the writing I focused on though other interesting areas existed such as Sara Staebler’s ‘invisible’ role in training, Jeff Wright’s focus on education and how it works with or against training, and Kelly’s training experience as a new employee.

I began finding out about the writing involved by asking Deb to send me a copy of the training documentation. As I read through the documentation I compiled a list of questions as comments in the documentation. The commented document was sent to her and Jeff Wright via email (See Appendix A) along with a general question concerning if they worked together on the documentation and if so how.

**Findings**

There were several established staff projects that I found out about while I spoke to members I knew. The first one I found out about was training preparation being done by Deb Chang (Tech Team Coordinator). Next I found out about several projects that were going on from ResComp’s Director Jeff Wright. Among these was that transition of Michigan Cable (campus television network) supervision from Resident Education (ResEd) to Housing Information Technology Office (HITO). Next was the Resident Life Initiative (RLI) that several staff members are involved in (Matt Simmons, Network Administrator; Beth Loesch; HITO Director); RLI involves several components including network infrastructure changes to resident halls, electrical upgrades, and new spaces available for students that focus on technology and information needs. This initiative is made up of several university organizations. The administrative assistant staff are currently preparing for a possible move (temporary) that would be needed if the Regents approve RLI infrastructure changes for Mary Markley Hall. Other projects include system for temporary employee applications, preference migration for Windows 2000
users, Network utility development, Resident Computer Systems Consultant (RCSC) hiring, Lock conversion, electronic forum, and staff web site changes.

After spending extra time talking with Deb about her experience preparing training I learned a great deal about how she views herself as a trainer, the difference in her mind between training and education, and the other parties involved in training. For Deb her roll as a trainer is very important. Experience training started for Deb as an undergraduate how had the opportunity to work as a Teaching Assistant for a Computer Science course at The University of Michigan. As a teaching assistant Deb saw herself as a trainer helping students grasp specific skills rather than teaching concepts. Deb sees skills as more applicable when those learning them have a better understanding of why they would want to use them. As a TA building a context for students to use seemingly abstract skills was an important part of her work. The importance of context-based skills has continued in Deb’s various roles as a trainer. Often even if Deb started work within an organization in a role other than training she would seek out, or others would see her capabilities in, a training role. Although she feels her current role, as Training coordinator is the next logical step in work as a trainer she does at times feel her capabilities in individual training situations are being neglected. As I examined the documentation she is working on I kept in mind ways her skills and passion, and others, could be used to benefit their workplace. Further focus on the documentation and the responses Deb sent me via email (See Appendix B) structured my recommendations.

**Recommendations**

By examining the documentation and responses Deb sent to my questions (see Appendix B), I have reason to believe expanding on the ways documentation is developed would be beneficial to ResComp. By doing training documentation more collaboratively Deb’s interest in individual training, Jeff Wright’s focus on education, taking advantage of underutilized staff, and involving and recruiting diverse interests from new staff could be accomplished.

Writing can serve as an important way that collaborative documentation could be accomplished. Not only would this provide Deb with the opportunity to work with staff individually to train them in documentation development, but it would also provide field views of the work staff members do and give them a chance to contribute to the position specific documents that are a goal in development. For example, by selecting an experienced and new staff member that share similar positions, such as a new lab consultant and a returning one, a fuller sense of job related tasks and what new members would need to know about their position could be pursued. By approaching documentation development collaboratively educational interests and needs could also be fulfilled.
Educational needs of engineering students employed ResComp could be particularly served by developing training material. Although engineering students usually have the opportunity to work on technical writing as a part of their senior design courses, ResComp could introduce this type of writing through training documentation preparation earlier. The interest in connecting education and training, though expressed as being particular related to engineering students, can serve to involve many different student employees.

As an English major I was often questioned as to what I could do with an English degree. The question typically followed with the defamation – teach – and as that is my eventual goal I would reply in the affirmative. As I had the opportunity to develop training material as a part of ResComp, I realized I could use my English degree in many other ways. By introducing and recruiting students from diverse academic environments they too can have this realization and in the process contribute in unique ways to ResComp. Jeff Wright’s focus on education and underutilized staff could serve as an important part of expanding on the sketch of how collaborative documentation could be developed.

Using the current documentation develop a list of student staff positions. After a list of student staff positions has been developed decide which ones need position specific training documentation. Once the documentation needed has been found, student staff to work on each document will be needed. By selecting a new and returning member for each position related document collaboration could better serve all contributors’ interests and meet specific needs more effectively. After selecting two students for each positional document, underutilized staff could serve as important contacts for the students as they develop documentation. With points of contact and student developers established a training structure to help staff think about preparing materials will need to be established.

A training structure could range from formal training sessions similar to those that make use of the general training documentation to online documentation development. Rather than specify a specific development format, principles for deciding on development procedures will be suggested. First of all, collaborative writing of documentations will help streamline work. By collaborating developers can build templates or other standards that all can follow when writing specific positional documents. The writing, document formatting, and other skills needed to complete documentation can be integrated into the existing supplemental training student staff can chose to take advantage of. For example, a general class on Microsoft word skills should include training on the collaborative tools such commenting on documents and establishing templates.

Second, the advantage of centralized document storage would enable developers to access and learn from other documents being developed. Many online tools may better serve the principle of centrally located and updated documents, but a filing cabinet could work in the same way. Last of all, the main advantage of collaboration is that individuals are able to do less work, but the group as a whole is more productive than isolated individuals. By considering and implementing these recommendations in a way that best serve the current needs and goals of ResComp the organization can continue to lead its peers within and outside of the University in way that meets and develops its reputation.