

him) provided all four categories of benefit, and that made an excellent deal for the fortunate Mr. Sofield. I was very willing to do my work at the academic end because Brad offered such a good deal to my student: money, relevant experience, and mentoring. We teachers are delighted when we can get others to teach our students for us.

After it was set up, this internship turned out to be fairly easy at my end. Bill e-mailed me weekly (or almost weekly) to let me know what he was doing, and I needed do little more than read his posts and return a brief acknowledgment and a few words of encouragement. The fact that we were in e-mail contact, combined with the fact that I saw Bill twice a week in my document design class, made it unnecessary to schedule special meetings with him.

I was happy to learn that Bill was writing, editing, interviewing, photographing, doing bibliographic work—in short, learning and polishing a wide range of communication skills. But in particular, I was gratified to know that he was being educated, not merely thrown into jobs and expected to learn. He reported that Brad was taking time to orient him, explain things, review his work (and ask for resubmittal!), take him along on assignments, and show him the ropes.

It's no surprise that a dedicated on-site mentor, someone with skill in teaching and willingness to teach, is the key to an excellent internship. Of course, a willing employer is fundamental, and a professor willing to run the internship for academic credit is important; after all, an internship takes a big chunk out of a student's week, and students need credits to maintain

their student status and to progress towards graduation. But the most important element of all is the student himself or herself: someone willing to show up on time, work hard, keep eyes and ears wide open, ask intelligent questions, take on all kinds of work (some interesting, some mundane—it's the "real world," right?), stretch his or her abilities, and give something back to the sponsoring organization. By this I mean giving something more than gratitude: I mean



solid help, billable hours, helping hands when deadlines loom—even work on jobs that have been hanging around forever because no one

could get past their regular duties to address them!

Add all these elements and mix well. A good internship is indeed a wonderful thing, and the internship with TCRD was a very good thing. I hope it will be a repeatable one!

## The Complicating Why

by Brad Connatser  
Tennessee Center for Research  
and Development

When I first met Bill Sofield—a technical communication student at the University of Tennessee—his willingness to place himself in the middle of complication impressed me. He was willing, for instance, to accept the role of *apprentice technical communicator* in a highly technical environment that was beyond his experience. He was willing to learn how to craft and revise technical prose at the cusp of a deadline, only to find



out that the deadline was playing possum all along (those sneaky engineers). He embraced equally the scholarly and professional obligations of his complication. And as we both *seemed* to slip comfortably into the roles of student and educator, I began to slip into a complication of my own.

The logistics of managing an internship are indeed challenging. For instance, initiating and maintaining a balanced regimen of instruction and real work were difficult. But gradually, even the complication of logistics was diminished to a trifle compared to my responsibility for anticipating and answering the *whys* of our profession.

Bill was in my care to learn cognitive skills—not motor skills—so question-and-answer and disquisition—rather than watch-and-learn—characterized our mode of exchange. During our conversations—and to my surprise—I had to dig deep to explain *why* I write and edit the way I do. Intuition was pressed hard to reveal its secrets. “That’s just the way it’s done” wasn’t enough to satisfy the penetrating nature of the complicating *why*.

Rhetorical strategies were placed in a context of cognitive science. Strict and often tiring scrutinies, engendered by the complicating *why*, enabled me to dismiss stale prescriptions. And subjects typically discussed in a poetry class suddenly became supporting evidence for making grammatical and mechanical decisions.

For example, we discussed meters, feet, and scansion to figure out why I preferred “based upon” rather than “based on.” In the face of the complicating *why*, I plowed personal theories about technical communication I had never articulated before. Inevitably, I plowed too close

Continued

to the corn. The manager-intern dyad was fostering a particularly trying mode of self-exploration that, for me, resulted in episodes of insecurity about my writing and editing routines.

When the first answer to the complicating *why* was “I don’t know,” I felt like an impostor, a pretender of expert knowledge. But about midway through the internship, I decided that the complicating *why* was in effect a solvent that dissolved the gasket between cognition and intuition—a good thing. What were once abstractions and nuances of the craft were slowly integrating into an ethos, a way of working with language without wholly relying upon the legacy of conventions and prescriptions that perhaps was stunting my professional growth.

The inertia of tradition hardens us against such unsettling inquiry, but by challenging my assumptions about technical communication, I was able to enhance my awareness of it. Had my employer not sponsored an internship, I may never have crossed paths with the complicating *why*. And Bill, he learned some things too. I wonder who learned more?

## More Than a Job

by Bill Sofield  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

When I first heard about the internship at TCRD, I was excited for several reasons. It was real work in the technical writing field, it paid, and I would get three credits toward graduation for it. I knew that this would be a good introduction into the real world of technical communication, so I was happy when I got the job. I had learned a lot in college, but let’s face

it: School isn’t life, and life isn’t school. At the internship, I learned from practical experience, not from books and lectures.

We all know that there are lessons in each place which can’t be learned in the other. Furthermore, I had just about exhausted the technical communication curriculum at the University of Tennessee, and I wasn’t looking forward to those poetry classes I would be forced to take to meet my major requirements.

Brad Connatser (my boss) had been a college-level writing instructor before he went into technical writing full time. That turned out to be an



added bonus for me. When I didn’t quite get things right, he was willing to spend some time explaining it to me, or, as was more often the case, asking me to think about what was wrong and correct it

myself. It actually turned out to be more like school than I had expected. On several occasions, he had me read about material that I wasn’t familiar with, or go to the library for resource material to do the job right. As a boss, Brad was easy going and good to work for. As an instructor, he challenged me to think my work through and do my best.

The work was fun as well as educational. I worked in an electrical testing lab whose core business was reporting to power utilities on power quality issues. At first I was amazed by the number of publications that the lab generated. After a few weeks though, I became more familiar with the schedule of publications, and the deadlines didn’t seem so daunting.

I got to see firsthand how the publications went from ideas to finished documents. That was something I had never seen in school. I also

enjoyed working with the technicians and electrical engineers at the lab. It was fun to translate their techno-garble into coherent sentences and see how the meaning came together in the finished piece. Several times I had what I thought was going to be the last revision, only to find that I had changed the meaning (sometimes drastically) from what it was supposed to have been. At times, it felt like there would perpetually be one more rewrite before publication. Eventually, though, each article did make it to the printer. As a bonus, I managed to pick up working knowledge of power quality terms and issues, and on one assignment I even had the privilege to go up in a utility company bucket truck. What fun!

I’m glad that I had the opportunity to work at this internship. The work was rewarding, and the staff friendly. I expect that the memories and experience will last a long time, and who knows, the education may even last a lifetime. 🍷

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*For more information about internships, consult the bibliography compiled for the STC Academic Industry Committee by Katherine Staples, Austin Community College, and Kris Sutliff, Southern Missouri State University. The text file intern.txt can be downloaded via ftp at:*

Host: ftp.usit.net

Directory: pub/concom

## Just for Laughs

I have a spelling checker;  
It came with my PC.  
It plane lee marks four my revue  
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.  
Eye ran this poem threw it.  
Your sure reel glad two no.  
Its vary polished in it’s weigh.  
My checker tolled me sew.  
To rite with care is quite a feet  
Of witch won should bee proud.  
And wee mussed dew the best wee can  
Sew flaws are knot aloud.