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New Year: Community Involvement!

Ryan Martin, STC Snake River Chapter President



Our holiday slumber is over and it is now time to start the New Year. Membership renewal period is during this time, so if you have not renewed yet, please take the time to do so. More information on member benefits and options can be found at the following website:

<http://www.stc.org/membership/duesTiersInfo.asp>

The topic of benefits provides a great segway into how we can get the most from our STC membership. Some suggestions I can give are:

- **Attend chapter meetings** –The content from the meetings may add to your knowledge or shine a light on how you might be able to improve your processes.
- **Attend networking events** - This is a great way to meet others in our tech comm community. Take advantage of the opportunity to forge relationships with people who have different skill sets and who may allow you to call upon their skills when you need to do something within your company (for example, XML, content management, document design, usability). You may find that the people you meet have something to offer your company in the form of workshops or expert advice in a specialized field.
- **Join and participate in a Special Interest Group (SIG)** –SIGs are a great way to focus on particular interests you may have in the world of technical communication. They can help you become more knowledgeable about tools, trends, and processes you use at work or could implement at work. SIGs usually have discussion boards you can join and send questions to regarding issues you may be having at work or best practices on implementing some process.
- **Read the publications** –You should receive the Journal of Technical Communication and Intercom as a benefit of membership. I suggest scanning these when new issues come out to see what trends are emerging and to see if any of the content is applicable to your situation or current work project.

I hope to see you all at the next chapter or book club meeting!

~Ryan

January, February, March, April

January

...has, of course, already passed. But there was a networking meeting on January 14th at Borders in the Boise Towne Square Mall. We had a surprisingly good turnout, and look forward to meeting even more of you at upcoming meetings!

February

This month we have a book club meeting planned. The book is "Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die" by brothers Chip and Dan Heath. This book discusses the six concepts that make ideas tangible and credible to any given audience. A New York bestseller, this book is entertaining and a quick and worthwhile read.

Our programs manager, Russell Willerton, has set up a blog to facilitate discussion at stcsrc.wordpress.com. You can add posts without registering, but if you would like to be able to create new posts/threads on the blog, register yourself at wordpress.com and then send Russell your e-mail address.

We look forward to seeing you there!

Topic: "Made to Stick" by Chip and Dan Heath

Date: Monday, February 11th, 2008

Time: 7:00pm

Location: Boise State University, Liberal Arts Building, Room 206

March

Our March meeting will be on emotional intelligence in the workplace. Emotional intelligence (EI) is one of the most important ideas to hit the business world in recent years. It is based on the notion that the ability of managers to understand their own emotions, and those of the people they work with, is the key to better business performance. Brian Thompson works at Micron and lectures frequently about Daniel Goleman's model of emotional intelligence.

Topic: Emotional Intelligence at Work

Speaker: Brian Thompson

Date: Monday, March 10, 2008

Time: 7:00pm

Location: Boise State University, Multi-Purpose Building, Room 106

April

Plans are still in the making, but the April meeting is tentatively on web and document design. Speaker and topic TBA, but we'll keep you posted.

Date: Wednesday, April 9th, 2008

Time: 7:00pm

Location: Boise State University, Room TBA

SIDENOTES

Corporate Partners

We would like to thank ExecuTrain, H&W, iLevel by Weyerhaeuser (formerly Trus Joist), and Barnes & Noble for generously donating their facilities for chapter functions. We would also like to thank SolutionPro for hosting our website.

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What is Structured Authoring?



Neil Perlin

by Neil Perlin, IEEE and STC Member

Structured authoring has become an increasingly hot topic in recent years. In theory, it can make documents easier for users to read, easier for authors to write, and easier to single source. It isn't perfect, of course. It reduces author "creativity." It demands more detailed planning and a higher level of technical skill and rigor than your company's culture may support. It can get political. And nothing is ever as easy as its adherents claim. But the benefits should offset the drawbacks. So, let's select an authoring tool and get going!

Just one problem ... what is structured authoring?

Outside the DITA and structured Framemaker communities, there's little consensus on an answer. So how do we justify structured authoring, never mind do it? In this column, I'll suggest four different definitions. One is silly, but it's here to make a point. Then I'll explain why, in my opinion, there's no one correct definition. Instead, the appropriate definition depends on each company's intent for its material and its culture, not the technology or the tools.

Definitions of Structured Authoring

So what is structured authoring? Here are four operational, not theoretical definitions:

1. *Hand-formatted.* All the material is in Normal style, with the heads and subheads hand-formatted using the formatting toolbar. This is common in documents created in Word. The material has a visual structure but no programmatic structure, so there's nothing at the code level for conversion tools to work with. (This isn't entirely true. RoboHelp has a Word import parser that tries to infer what the author was trying to do. It's surprisingly effective but doesn't solve the basic problem—authors who don't use "true" styles.)

This is the silly definition that I mentioned earlier. If it's silly, why list it? The reason is that authors need to understand the difference between visual and programmatic structure in order to create "truly" structured documents. Many authors don't.

Until they do, any structured authoring effort is likely to fail because the authors won't understand what they're doing. As far as they're concerned, it's just a change in how they work, but for no clear reason.

2. *Structured using head styles.* The material now has a programmatic structure that can be used for further processing, such as telling a help authoring tool's import feature to split an incoming Word file into separate topics every time it finds text in a particular head style. This is common in documents created in Word or mainstream help authoring tools by authors who are just starting to use styles. This option is better than option 1, but still far from perfect because the programmatic structure—controlled by the styles—is at the author's discretion and not enforced by the software.
3. *Structured using head styles and a template.* The material has a programmatic structure that supports further processing, like option 2. Option 3 is found in documents created in Word or mainstream help authoring tools by authors who are moving beyond simple styles and creating templates that incorporate styles or style sheets. This method is better than option 2 because the template supports the use of styles.

The author no longer has to apply styles manually by selecting from a style sheet or pulldown. Instead, the author simply types headings, text, etc., in different parts of the template to which the template's creator has already assigned styles.

Continued on next page...

The author's material gets automatically styled. What's still missing, however, is enforcement of the styles. Authors can modify the styles at their discretion and the software won't stop them, which brings up the final option.

4. *Structured by adhering to a DTD or schema, like DocBook or DITA.* The material now has a programmatic structure that's defined by and enforced by the software; material must follow the structural rules dictated by the DTD or schema. GUI authoring tools that work this way "know" where the author is within the body of a document and will only let the author do things that are legal according to the DTD or schema. For example, an author could only insert a level 2 heading after a level 1. The software won't let the author insert a level 3 heading after a level 1 heading. So option 4 is clearly the best choice, or is it? Although it is a better choice because of the support and enforcement of structure, it may not be the best one in many cases because of issues of intent and culture.

The Intent and Culture Issues

Intent and company culture may force authors away from option 4, no matter how good it seems. Consider these issues involved in adopting option 4:

- Current mainstream tools like Word and help authoring tools support styles and templates but don't support structural enforcement, so companies will have to buy new tools. With the cost of new tools comes the cost of training and lower productivity until authors learn the new tool. (Many companies skip training and tell authors to "figure it out." This is a short-term savings but a huge long-term loss because of the inefficiency with which the authors use the tool.)
- Option 4 uses technologies like CSS and XML that may be new and unfamiliar. Authors need not be experts in those technologies but they should understand at least conceptually how those technologies drive their authoring tools. If they don't, they won't use the tools effectively because they won't understand why they're doing what they're doing.
- Option 4 demands a higher level of development rigor than many companies now follow. For example, authors must use a style sheet as is; they can no longer tweak a style a little bit "just this once." Authors must check documents into their CMS at the end of the day rather than waiting until tomorrow morning because "it's going to snow and I have to leave now before the roads get jammed," and so on.

So moving to option 4 will be difficult for many companies. If these companies don't plan to use or single source their material in ways that call for the structural rigor of option 4, they won't be able to justify it. Or if a company's culture doesn't emphasize technology, training, and rigor, the authors may adopt option 4 but will have trouble making it work. Instead, option 3 or even 2 may be the better choice.

In summary, your working definition of structured authoring should be based on the situation in which your company finds itself, not on one generic, forced definition. Only then can you start the process of picking authoring tools and creating structured material with confidence.

Neil Perlin is president of Hyper/Word Services (<http://www.hyperword.com>) of Tewksbury, MA. He has 28 years of experience in technical communication with 22 in training, consulting, and development for online formats and tools. He is a member of the IEEE and STC, an associate fellow of the STC, and can be reached at nperlin@concentric.net or <http://www.hyperword.com>. This article originally appeared in the IEEE-PCS Newsletter.

2008 STC Election

from Ed Rutkowski, STC Publications Manager, Editor of Intercom

The annual STC election will be held in March and April, 2008, and only members who have paid their dues by February 28, 2008, will be eligible to vote.

An option on the dues renewal forms and new membership applications for 2008 allows members to receive their ballots via e-mail. In March, members who selected this option will be e-mailed voting instructions. Members who did not select this option will receive their ballots by first-class mail.

Be sure to renew your membership by February 28 to have a say in STC's future!

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Second Vice President	Michael A. Hughes	www.stc.org/candidatesFAQ/candBio01.asp?candID=1	www.mindspring.com/~mikehughes
	Larry Kunz	www.stc.org/candidatesFAQ/candBio01.asp?candID=2 lk81924.googlepages.com/home	
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	Rich Maggiani	www.stc.org/candidatesFAQ/candBio01.asp?candID=10	users.adelphia.net/~richmaggiani/

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	Thea Teich	www.stc.org/candidatesFAQ/candBio01.asp?candID=16	

Upcoming Web Seminars

Topic: Converting Captivate Demonstrations into Simulations

Speaker: Kevin Siegel

Date: Wednesday, February 13, 2008

Time: 1-2:30 PM ET (18:00-19:30 GMT)

Cost: \$79.00 USD (STC Members) or \$99.00 USD (non-members)*

Abstract:

You can use Adobe Captivate to create demonstrations and simulations; however, most people who teach themselves Captivate create demonstrations instead of simulations. The most common reasons for this are: 1) I didn't know how to create a simulation in Captivate; and 2) I thought creating a simulation would be too hard. This seminar will take participants through the process of creating simulations in Captivate as well as provide tips on how to quickly convert existing Captivate demonstrations into simulations.

*With all seminars, the cost is per site, not per person. One site can have only one phone connection and one computer connection. You will be issued an enrollment ID, passcode and phone number when you register and pay for the seminar. If you forward your ID, passcode and/or phone number to others or use it on more than one computer or phone connection, you will be billed \$150 for each additional connection used.

Please note that registration closes 24 hours prior to the event.

ABOUT THE SNAKE RIVER CHAPTER



Ryan Martin



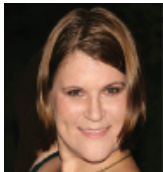
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ABOUT THE SIDEBAR NEWSLETTER



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Newsletter Editor

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