
The Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing: Its Early History

Joan Pavelich and Michael Jordan

The story of the genesis and early days of CATTW is a very important chapter in the history of technical writing teaching and scholarship in Canada. As the tenth anniversary of our meetings at the Learned's approached, Joan Pavelich and Mike Jordan were asked to describe the part they played in the activities leading up to our first meeting in Guelph in 1984 and to comment on the key subsequent events in our history.

Joan Pavelich Remembers:

The Concept

CREATING THE ASSOCIATION wasn't my idea. In 1981 I had gone to the CCCC in Dallas because it had the most technical writing sessions of any U.S. conference, drew teachers from both universities and community colleges, offered a first class publishers' display with free texts, and hosted the annual meeting of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW—U.S.). During happy hour, in the glamorous lobby of the Dallas hotel, amid splashing waterfalls and a tinkling piano, along came Dave Carson with a big smile and the suggestion we should have an association in Canada and I ought to organize it. Dave Carson was at Rensselaer (home of *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* and TWIT, the Technical Writing Institute for Teachers) and one of the core ATTW enthusiasts, who held various executive positions. This was empire building, of course, though cheerfully done. I remember him giving me two whiskeys and my rejecting the third. I agreed to try.

The Beginning

I'm a warm Canadian nationalist, which conditioned some of the things I did. I recognized two hurdles. First, no money would be available from UBC or the English Department, so I did things on the cheap and spent my own money. The only financial contribution came from the ATTW via Dave—a year's free membership in the ATTW, including its journal, for a joining membership in CATTW—which I advertised as a \$10 bargain on my opening poster.

Second, little encouragement would be offered. For example, the opening poster used my English Department address, but since I was worried the Department would disapprove, I had never asked permission. I just hoped they wouldn't find out until the association was afoot. Lucky me. In 1982, when I applied for a year's sabbatical to go across the country investigating technical writing, the Dean refused, saying he couldn't see any importance in developing technical writing in Canada, or benefit to UBC in anything I'd find or do. This from an economist. Fortunately, the English Department chair disagreed and wangled the sabbatical.

The Name CATTW

I chose the name CATTW partly to capitalize on the familiar title ATTW, but largely for ease of pronunciation. I didn't want to become a pale American imitation for fear members, however keenly they joined, would slip away from CATTW and renew their subscriptions only to the grander ATTW. To retain them, I tried to stress Canadian content, that is, to answer the questions:

- What is technical writing in Canada? What's going on in our business and industry?
- Who teaches it? What's in the courses? What are the texts?
- How are we different from the U.S.?

And I decided to be bilingual always. I had the help of my daughter Joan, a grad student in Montreal studying comparative Canadian lit, who investigated and created the bilingual title *Technostyle* (in French *Technosteel*), and the phrase "rédaction technique and scientifique". Quebec universities were teaching technical writing but didn't have a special term for it.

I printed the opening poster—an 8.5" x 15" sheet, black on white, in French and English—and mailed it across the country to universities and com-

munity colleges whose addresses I had looked up in the library.

Technostyle

In appearance the early *Technostyle* issues are primitive because they had to be printed cheaply by the campus photocopying service. They became a professional package when Jennifer Connor at Western Ontario took over as editor/publisher in 1984. Their contents were fun to assemble. I wrote and phoned people to report what they were doing; I couldn't just sit back, issue a call for papers and get enough articles. Some examples:

- I was teaching with Ron Blicq's *Technically Write!* While I was looking up his Red River College address, a librarian remembered a Tony Blicq at UBC Press, who turned out to be Ron's brother. Note that *Technically Write!* was the first Canadian authored college text and was among the top 10 used by community colleges in the U.S. Ron holds our national record with five texts.
- I saw an ad in the *Vancouver Sun's* business section for a technical writer at Coopers Lybrand. I jumped on the phone and received an appointment with the man behind the ad. I confess to enjoying a swish around a corporate tower; he was an executive ("Pardon me a minute, Joan. I have to phone South Africa."), yet interested in CATTW's purpose. He wrote an excellent article explaining what specific qualifications the successful candidate needed and what specific writing was required.
- My daughter, Joan, knew Sherbrooke University prided itself on being genuinely bilingual, and thus concerned with teaching writing. She solicited two articles, one on their writing courses, anglo/franco, and one on the functions of L'Office de la langue française. Note Sherbrooke produced the first Quebec college text; good old Pierre Collinge sent me an inscribed copy: *Rédaction Technique* by Helen Cajolet-Laganier, Pierre Collinge and Gerard Laganier, 1983 Sherbrooke.
- During the sabbatical I encountered central Canada's schools of translators and interpreters. They train and certify competence to write in both languages. One morning I walked into the Director's office

at the University of Ottawa's School, and told her secretary I represented CATTW and was editor of the journal (well, there are times to sound impressive) and wished 20 minutes with the Director. Granted. Then I told the Director the truth, that her school was doing the best job in Canada teaching technical writing. I defined the term, proved she was doing it all (the Americans, I reminded, did it in one language only) but didn't know she was, nor did anyone else seem to but CATTW would say so, and would she send someone to Guelph? Also, no money. I said she didn't need money, just someone who'd drive to Guelph and back in one day. And that's how we gained Jacqueline Bossé-Andrieu, who attended the whole conference (the Director gave her \$50), and presented our first French paper.

- The federal government became another gold mine. They teach everything, bilingually, in their huge in-service training programs, but they don't bother telling outsiders. I collected texts, booklets, and course outlines. I found interesting stories everywhere. I met an administrator who wrote three ministerials in 24 hours—speeches/reply statements a minister must make to a defined audience which the writer has to research, write, submit to the deputy minister for vetting, revise, and hand in neatly typed next morning. Most ministers apparently want to sound impressive, but actually say little. All this, and the happy phenomenon that the feds can usually get funds to attend the Learned's. Nothing beats their standing up front explaining how much writing government has to do and emphasizing they have to teach it because campuses don't.

First National Conference

We needed a conference and I decided to try for the Learned's. First, I scouted around to find out how the conference was organized, who was in charge at Guelph and how an association qualified for admission. Then, I wrote a letter to the appropriate administrator applying, citing three years of existence, bilingual and national membership, two years of published journals (well, he didn't ask to see *Technostyle*), and academic and professional writers. I tried to be persuasive; for example, I badgered Mike Jordan into being the on-site representative, required to attend meetings and see to all our preparations. We'd never met and he had the sense to be somewhat suspicious of the

scheme but agreed. I knew the administrator would be impressed by Queen's University.

Weeks went by with no reply, so I phoned the administrator. He was queasy, said he'd been trying to make up his mind, then agreed to take us as a secondary society (meaning largely CATTW couldn't apply for any funding) with the hesitant statement, "I'll probably get flack when people see that term 'technical writing'."

Next year came Montreal. Our core enthusiasts decided to become a proper Learned's society (funding!), so the AGM adopted a constitution, and elected a complete executive.

Calgary, 10 years later . . . wasn't that a fine panel of experts Sunday morning!

Michael Jordan Remembers:

I joined the CATTW around 1981 as probably one of the earliest members, after responding to a mailing that gave details of the aims of the newish organization. As I recall, the first few issues of *Technostyle* had little substance, dealing with "How to" topics, and were of little interest to me. However, the annual fee was low and the membership in a Canadian technical writing group was something I had some interest in, so I stayed a member for a while.

Around 1982 or 1983, Joan Pavelich phoned me and asked me what I thought about CATTW becoming a "learned" society. At the time I didn't know much about the Learned's, and had spent quite a bit of my time with the STC and also some with the ABC. I recall writing Joan that the new CATTW might overlap with the STC and/or ABC as it seemed to be doing nothing different. I also had reservations (a) as to how the French element would work in a "learned" CATTW, and (b) whether there was any meaningful justification for us to be given "learned" status. In short, I was not very enthusiastic about the idea—but Joan was not to be deterred!

The next time I heard from Joan—a very excited phone call some time in the summer before our first Learned's conference—she proudly announced that the Learned's people had accepted CATTW for inclusion in their next conference, to be held at Guelph U. She also casually mentioned that she'd told them I would represent the Association at Guelph, and would that be all right with me?! She explained how useful the Learned's would be and that I could get involved with the rhetoric, linguistics, ESL societies as well as this group. Joan is not the sort of person you can say "No" to very easily, and so I

was soon persuaded to get things organized for our first conference.

So later in the Fall, I went to Guelph representing a group I knew next to nothing about and explaining the sort of work our members did as teachers and researchers. (At least I explained the sorts of things I thought we *ought* to be doing—and that seemed to satisfy them enough.)

As I was now a sort of CATTW representative and more or less had to go to the Learned's anyway, I decided to present a paper there. I recall giving this first CATTW paper quite vividly. There was some polite applause, but, apart from one or two (I exaggerate not), I had the distinct impression that no one had any idea what I was talking about.

In any case, my first CATTW presentation was later published by the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* as a paper on "Lexical and Co-hyponymic Connection in Technical Publicity." I decided then that, whatever others decided to do at Learned conferences, anything I presented would be aimed at the scholarly side of CATTW interests rather than the teaching side. I have not regretted that decision, although for many years I felt a little isolated as few others seemed to be that interested in research.

At the next conference, in Montreal, I gave a bilingual paper on intra-sentential logical connections. I sweated blood over that paper, not because of the linguistic technicalities, but because of my use of examples in French as well as English, and also my discussion in both languages. It was intended as a real effort to show that we could be bilingual, and I feel it was very well received.

Montreal was important socially for CATTW, as I believe it was there that we came together as a group of friends, and not just a collection of Technical Writing Teachers. We had a memorable dinner at a Greek restaurant in downtown Montreal, and the tradition has remained with us. Some have left our original group, and others have been warmly welcomed; but the comradeship we share as a group is probably unique in Canadian scholarship.

Also, after Guelph and Montreal, we were beginning to have better papers offered for publication in *Technostyle*, and the need was expressed for the journal to be refereed and to have higher standards of scholarship. Jennifer Connor was at the forefront of this movement, and, through *Technostyle*, did much in the earlier days of CATTW's development to help the Association develop the way it has.

Sometime later I was very surprised to receive another phone call from Joan, asking me if I would consider being nominated for Vice-President (and thus President). I was extremely reluctant. This was partly because of the

work it would involve, but was largely because I was not sure that I wanted to be President of a group which, in my view, still had a long way to go before really justifying the title of "learned". Joan, however, said that the nominating committee really wanted me to do the job for that very reason: that, yes, there was still a need to stress the importance of scholarship for the CATTW, and that was why they wanted me to be Vice-President and then President.

I do not regret the decision. I had still retained some involvement with the STC and ABC. Around that time, I had attended an international STC conference in Detroit, where I had been disgusted at the appallingly low level of intellectual discussion there. I resolved not to attend any further STC meetings, and this left me with more energy for CATTW. As Vice-President (and thus Programme Chair) for the Windsor conference, I invited our first guest lecturer, Barbara Couture, from Wayne State University, Detroit.

Since then, of growing importance has been the scholarly interaction between members. As a Learned society concerned with scholarship of functional English and French, we are now an Association that can no longer be ignored. Our improved standards have more than kept pace with improved standards in universities generally. When CATTW started, there were few PhD members, whereas new highly-qualified academics have joined us, and others are working on or have just completed PhDs. In addition, our members are receiving recognition through promotions of academic rank, book publications, and international publication of notable papers and articles. As a group of scholars as well as teachers, we have a unique role to play in the development of our discipline.

SSHRC travel funding has been vital in our coming together as a group at the Learned's each year and the continued existence of the CATTW in its present form. It has also helped considerably in funding our publishing work. As we are now in a period of extreme recession and government cutbacks (which are already affecting university travel funding and could affect SSHRC funding), we may have to seek creative ways of continuing our Association.

Joan Pavelich is now retired from the University of British Columbia.

Michael Jordan is in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at Queen's University.

