

Un Programme de Mentorat International? Mais Oui, C'est Possible! Absolument!

By Clio Fouque and Dan Voss

Abstract

This paper describes a trans-Atlantic mentoring initiative involving the STC Orlando and STC France chapters, the University of Central Florida, and the University of Paris Diderot (Paris 7). The co-authors launched their own international bilingual mentoring relationship at last year's conference and are using it as a means of piloting a broader initiative. The goal was to set up a mentoring program between the STC-France chapter and the University of Paris Diderot modeled on the one between STC-Orlando and UCF. The possibility also exists for international exchanges and cooperation between professional technical communicators within the two chapters as well as technical communication students within the two universities.



FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC...

How does a trans-Atlantic mentoring relationship begin? For us, it began at the AccessAbility SIG business meeting on Monday morning, May 6, 2009, at the 56th annual international STC conference in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Except we didn't know it yet! We weren't personally introduced at the meeting, although we both participated. As a former manager of the AccessAbility SIG, I was heartened to see such obvious interest in the subject from an intelligent and personable young student who, by her accent at least, I surmised was from the STC-France chapter.

That's where serendipity stepped in. Conferences are sprawling, hectic events, and it is entirely possible to meet somebody once at the beginning and never run into that person again for the rest of the conference. And we hadn't even really met yet.

But by good fortune, our paths crossed again just a few hours later when we wound up sitting next to each other at the Marketing SIG's networking lunch. We introduced ourselves and began chatting animatedly. In addition to our mutual interest in

accessibility, we soon learned that a number of Clio's potential career options closely matched Dan's experience and skill sets. It was evident right from the start that despite the age difference between us (we won't define that any more precisely! ☺), our interests and our personalities aligned very closely.

In fact, Dan was thinking, "What a shame Clio isn't from the University of Central Florida! She and I would make a great mentor-mentee pair!" Dan was thinking in terms of the mentoring program pairing UCF technical communication students with professionals from the STC Orlando chapter. As the luncheon wore on and their conversation raced along non-stop, an idea began to take shape in Dan's mind. "Why not?" he suddenly declared, not realizing he had said the words aloud.

"Why not *what*?" Clio said, puzzled—wondering, perhaps, if we Americans typically went around talking to ourselves.

"Oh," Dan said, laughing. "I just had a great idea and I didn't realize I had expressed it aloud."

"What's your idea?" Clio asked.

Dan told Clio about the mentoring program between the STC Orlando chapter and the technical communication program at the University of Central Florida and asked her if she might be interested in

pursuing a trans-Atlantic virtual partnership as a mentor-mentee pair in the 2009-2010 program.

Clio liked the idea. The two agreed to meet again during the conference to establish goals and objectives and plan activities that could be accomplished at a distance to execute their plan.

As it turned out, both were so busy during the conference that the only available “window” of time to hold their initial—and, given the distance that was about to separate them, their *only*—face-to-face meeting as mentor and mentee was 40 minutes on Thursday morning just before Clio had to leave for her flight back to Paris.

They found a quiet meeting room in the conference center, and Dan pulled up the mentor-mentee agreement form on his laptop. With the clock ticking, the two wasted no time mapping out objectives and activities that would tap Dan’s experience to coach Clio in a number of areas of professional interest. In addition to their mutual interest in accessibility, those areas included marketing communication, particularly proposals; management techniques, including ethics in technical communication; and writing for internal and external media.

Their objectives were defined with 20 minutes to spare, so the two decided to add one more goal—to help the STC-France chapter, of which Clio was secretary, to establish a mentoring program with the University of Paris 7 (Diderot), where Clio was completing her studies for her third masters degree—this one in technical communication.

Dan explained to Clio that he and his first mentee, Bonnie Spivey, had done precisely that back in 2002, leveraging their own mentoring relationship to pilot the STC Orlando chapter/UCF mentoring program (Spivey, Voss 2002). Dan gave Clio a CD containing information about the program, including the various tools he and Bonnie had developed to institute and administer the mentoring program. (Lippincott, Selix, Spivey, Voss 2002)

With time running out on Clio’s departure for the airport, the two shook hands (Figure 1)—both to officially begin their own mentor-mentee relationship

(the forms could be completed by e-mail) and also to commit to the goal of initiating a mentoring program between the STC-France chapter and the University of Paris Diderot, using the STC Orlando chapter/UCF program as a model.



Figure 1. AND SO IT BEGAN. Clio and Dan outlined the objectives for their trans-Atlantic virtual mentoring relationship in Atlanta last year just before Clio headed to the airport to return to Paris.

And so began their international mentoring relationship.

Shortly after Clio returned to Paris and Dan to Orlando, they completed the forms on their mentoring relationship via e-mail and Dan submitted them to the managers of the 2009-2010 STC Orlando chapter/UCF mentoring program. Since its inception, the program had had a number of successful “distance” mentoring relationships, but this one was certainly expanding the geographic envelope!

Dan sent Clio some materials on accessibility which he had promised her in Atlanta and then sent some materials on ethics in technical communication—an area they decided to explore first.

It was then that an interesting series of events on both sides of the Atlantic sent their mentoring relationship into a different direction. In France, Clio became extremely busy due to a combination of her studies at the University of Paris Diderot, where she was preparing to defend for her masters degree in technical communication (the “soutenance”) as well as continuing to fulfill her responsibilities in her not-

so-part-time job in technical communication—leaving her little spare time to pursue ethics or the other areas of professional development outlined in their mentoring objectives. Meanwhile, in the United States, Dan was in the opposite situation, on a 6-week medical leave following surgery, where he found himself in a place he was unaccustomed to being—not having 15 things to do at once!

He even had enough time to “dust off” his high school French, although even armed with his trusty English-French dictionary and grammar book, his French was no match for Clio’s English! [The alert reader will notice this article is “en anglais, pas en français.” ☺] Yet, Dan’s efforts and relentless attempts at writing in her own native language kept impressing Clio. She could not believe that somebody who had not practiced for such a long time could even remember old French phrases—which made her smile and sometimes laugh.

Clio’s command of English proved most fortunate, because the mentoring relationship was about to take a turn into philosophical territory—an area Dan could surely not have navigated “en français”!

When Clio expressed her concern about her upcoming soutenance (would she pass?) as well as her search for her first full-time job in technical communication (would she succeed at a critical upcoming job interview?)—in the process revealing her own tendencies toward perfectionism and the frustration it can create—Dan saw a perfect opportunity to do some long-distance mentoring. Himself a life-long perfectionist and “workaholic,” he had a wealth of advice to share on how to channel perfectionism in accordance with business priorities (read: budget limitations) and how to deal with the anxiety that results from consciously adjusting quality levels to best address business requirements.

Forced into a 6-week rest from his busy job at Lockheed Martin, Dan took advantage of the opportunity to compose a series of e-letters to Clio, using the metaphor of going on long walks together to explore such pressing issues as perfectionism, the anxiety attendant thereunto, self-confidence, and more. These philosophical e-letters contain personal information, protected under the confidentiality of a mentoring relationship and therefore are not subject

to a detailed discussion in this forum. However, this brief excerpt from “A Walk in the Country” provides some insight into the unexpected turn of events their mentoring relationship had taken:

Let’s take a walk in the country. We’ll start by my parents’ house and hike through the hay fields to the top of the mountain, where we can see for miles. On the way back, we’ll walk through the forest and come out by the little pond at the bottom of my parents’ property. You might want a light sweater, because it can get a little chilly in the shade. When we’re in the sun, you’ll probably want to carry the sweater.

I have put much thought into what would be the best way for me to mentor you when it comes to the issues you have described. I can definitely address perfectionism, because that is a battle I have been fighting myself through most of my life. However, when you dig beneath the surface to get at the underlying causes of perfectionism, as well as the underlying reasons for lack of self-confidence, you get into many other areas, particularly psychology and spirituality. These are, of course, very personal areas. I have no problem sharing at this level from my side if you are comfortable from your side. Are you?

Clio responded to the “walks” with her own philosophical reflections. In a near-daily exchange of e-mails, the two shared their thoughts on some difficult family issues they were each dealing with at the time. It soon became evident, as Dan had told Clio would most likely be the case, that mentoring often becomes a “two-way street.” By Christmastime, their mentoring relationship had deepened into a strong personal friendship born of honesty and trust.

A perfect example of the two-way street occurred in February as the deadline for this *Proceedings* article approached and the initiative to establish a formal mentoring program between the STC-France chapter and the University of Paris Diderot encountered some delays. A very successful meeting at the University of Paris Diderot in January (Figure 2) had identified several students as prospective mentees, but preparations for its annual conference in April (the Content Strategy Forum) had slowed the STC-France chapter’s recruitment of mentors to pair with the

students. Dan, ever deadline conscious, expressed concern that the process wasn't moving quickly enough. That's when Clio introduced him to the concept of "relativiser," a term



Figure 2. EXTENDING A NEW OPPORTUNITY. Ray Gallon of the STC-France Chapter, co-manager of the new mentoring program, does some recruiting with Clio at the University of Paris Diderot, in the classroom where Clio attended courses last year.

which, loosely translated, means "to chill out"—not exactly Dan's strong suit. ☺ However, mentor accepted the wise counsel from mentee, and the pair agreed to describe just the beginnings of the new mentoring program in this article and follow with the details in their presentation at the 57th annual international STC conference in Dallas.

So if you are interested in the rest of the story, you'll find it in the Academic SIG's progression, "Across the Spectrum" in a tabletop presentation entitled "Reaching Across the Atlantic—an International Mentoring Initiative."

As this article went to "press," Clio and Dan were just beginning to pursue the primary areas of professional development they had identified in their meeting in Atlanta, and the STC-France/University of Paris mentoring program was like an airplane taxiing down the runway, not yet airborne but ready to take off. But what Clio and Dan had not yet accomplished in the areas of ethics, proposals, and management paled in comparison to all that they had shared and the close and trusting relationship that had grown between them in the process.

So, was the international mentoring relationship a success?

Mais oui !



FROM THE EUROPEAN SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC...

When Dan alluded to the mentoring program, I must admit I was really interested in this kind of "tutoring," which could definitely help students feel more involved in their future field of work. What could be a better way of knowing about the job of technical communicators than as it was *really experienced on a daily basis*? And above all, what could be a better way of gaining some support other than family and friends—who could not understand why you study how to write "manuals and guides nobody reads," other than student peers and teachers?

Of course, I guess that my natural curiosity, enthusiasm, and inclination towards new experimentations that can include growing up, gaining experience, and confronting communication issues truly helped me make my decision quite rapidly. My tendency not to be reluctant and hesitant could not have been more necessary and useful than it was on that occasion.

And so it was agreed between us. I was immediately convinced that our mentoring relationship could work, and that we could take advantage of the geographical distance between us to create a new kind of relationship. That was the novelty I was proud of bringing to Dan. And I added my learning of new technologies and my French sayings. ;-).

We had a starting bond to nourish, strengthen, and expand. We did it by many ways. Dan's "Walks" were amazingly deep and enriching, full of hints of how we, as sensitive human beings, can deal with relationships and duties in private life and in the workplace.

As months went by, I decided to vary the media I would use to correspond with Dan. I shared words, of course, but also articles and pictures of French sights, places, monuments, etc, and even of travels I did. Sometimes the latter ones came with comments. Sometimes with sayings. Sometimes with a mere—but powerful—smiley emoticon. ☺ Because visuals may speak better than words.

From time to time I asked Dan about problems or simple questions I had about my student and apprentice’s life. I also presented some of my projects to him. He always gave me a genuine answer: simple comments or precious advice. He stood by me—and *still* stands by me—and really kept encouraging me, trying to convince me of my worth, of the wealth of accomplishments I had made ...this without ever giving up. I admire him for this. I thank him, too.

I think I also tried to give him the best advice I could in terms of managing not to accept too much workload, trying to “relativiser” (take it easy and be patient because there is literally “*nothing you can do*” without stressing over nothing), and enjoying free time as much as he could. I introduced him to Instant Messaging, but our promising beginning in this medium could not often be repeated because of bad Internet connections on both sides, not to mention the time difference. ☺ Too bad... but there are much worse things in life!

One achievement I am proud of? Our ongoing personal and professional relationship: Dan as *the Mentor*, Clio as *the Mentee*.

A NEW MENTORING PROGRAM IS BORN!

A second one? The French version of the technical communication mentoring program, which was discussed among the STC France Chapter's Board Members, Orlando Chapter leaders, and other enthusiastic people for months since I came back from the 2009 STC Summit in Atlanta. After a meeting including our mentor coordinator, the students, the University coordinators, and me in January, the program has finally been launched. At last! You cannot imagine how proud I was to send

Dan the hyperlink leading toward our most recent [STC France Chapter's newsletter](#) announcing our new mentoring program.

After several months of preparation, the STC-France Chapter is now kicking off the mentoring program with mentors from our Chapter and students from my former university (the University of Paris–Diderot). As this article went to “press,” we had 5 mentors and 5 mentees—a very fortunate match!—who had completed the application forms (see Figure 3), and we were in the process of pairing them up. These pairings were scheduled to become official at the Content Strategy Forum in Paris April 15-16, 2010, an international event co-organized by the STC-France and the STC Trans-Alpine chapters. A “Mentor-Mentee Meet-up” corner was to be set up to allow mentors and mentees to meet, share their first thoughts and impressions, and decide if they actually want to start the great “mentoring adventure” together.

Figure 3. ON-LINE SIGN-UPS. STC-France parlayed STC-Orlando’s Google-Doc forms into a web-based application process to kick off its mentoring program with the University of Paris Diderot.

What a huge evolution! What a promising new journey! I do not doubt that more is to come in the years ahead.

When I think it all started in that little meeting room in the conference center in Atlanta...

Vive le programme de mentorat international!



ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

CLIO FOUQUE was born in France but has spent most of her life traveling, from New Caledonia to the U.S., via Reunion Island and Australia. She first completed a masters degree in English from the University of Reunion Island (with a full year abroad in Arkansas, U.S., and several months in Australia) and two masters degrees in tourism management from the University of Brighton in the UK and the Ecole de Management de Normandie in France. Clio then worked for several years as a writer and customer advisor in various tourism companies and groups (including Air France Flying Blue) before entering the technical communication field. In October 2009, Clio graduated from the graduate-level technical communication program at the University of Paris Diderot, completing her fourth masters' degree. Clio has acquired a broad skill set ranging from e-learning and Web design to marketing writing, information architecture, and knowledge management. As she graduated, she completed a long-term internship at UCatchIt, a small company where she served both as a writer and an editor for search engine optimization (SEO) web content. Following graduation, she assumed a full-time technical communication position at Hypertexte, focusing on Web writing, e-learning, SEO (search engine optimization) and training. She has presented at STC France's annual conference as well as at the STC France chapter's Annual General Meeting and at the University of Paris. Clio is particularly

interested in helping to connect French- and English-speaking professionals and students.

DAN VOSS has 32 years' experience in aerospace at Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control (LMMFC) where he is currently Communications manager for the Tactical Missiles mission area, and he has also taught high school and college. He is a Fellow in the Society for Technical Communication and is a member of STC's Orlando Chapter, where he has been extensively involved in educational outreach initiatives. With Bonnie Spivey, he developed a highly successful mentoring program between the STC Orlando Chapter and the University of Central Florida. Dan managed STC's AccessAbility SIG for 2 years and remains active. He has presented at 21 international and 9 regional STC conferences, including successful workshops on ethics, editorial training, integrated strategic communication, the ethics of visual communication, and other topics. With Lori Allen, he co-authored *Ethics in Technical Communication: Shades of Gray* (Wiley, 1997) and has published numerous articles. With Shirley Hancock-Andersen, he co-authored the original STC Ethical Guidelines in 1994. He has received the Distinguished Service Award both from the Orlando Chapter and the AccessAbility SIG and also the Gloria Jaffe Award for the Most Outstanding Technical Communicator in Central Florida. Dan has earned three of Lockheed Martin's top awards for communication and excellence for his leadership on a successful major proposal and marketing campaign, and is the only non-engineer to receive LMMFC's coveted Author-of-the-Year Award.

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