



The Quill

April 2003 Volume 14 Number 7

www.stc.waterloo.on.ca



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Nominations Coming to a Close

Take a chance and make a difference

by Ted Edwins, Chapter President

The process of collecting nominations for next year's council is well underway. We are pleased that a number of the present council have signed up. It is also encouraging to have new people take up a task. However, we are still well short of our goals.

We have about 27 "managerial" type positions to fill. These positions are either as head of a committee or as leader of one of our Special Interest Groups (SIGs). There are also a number of committee member positions still available. No matter how much or how little time you have to devote, we have a volunteer task for you.

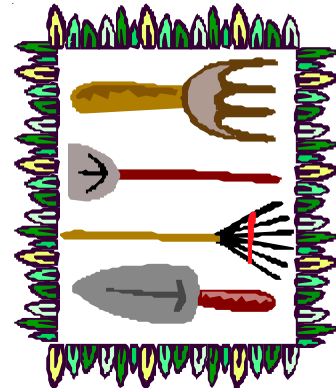
Council understands the demands on a person's time. That is why we have worked very hard over the past few years to divide committee work into small chunks, so that people can more easily fit the work into their schedule.

Among the most important of these positions still available are President and Competition Manager. As President, you are the public face of the chapter. You are required to lead council meetings and provide information to fellow council members to help them complete their projects. The most satisfying part of the job is to present awards to chapter members. You get to meet many members of the chapter, establishing a network of contacts that you can utilize in your career. The President also has \$1000 of expenses covered to attend the STC International Conference and participate in Leadership Day. I found Leadership Day to be the best part of the conference as I was able to talk with other chapter leaders to get ideas for our chapter, and I discovered that all chapters face the same challenges we do.

The Competition Manager is another position requiring a year-long commitment. The manager oversees the receiving of entries, training of judging, and distribution of awards. The manager receives help from various committee members, a Toronto Chapter Competition Manager, and a whole chapter of other people to recruit for help.

For more information about the positions, please consult last month's Quill, visit www.stc.waterloo.on.ca/chapterinfo/nominations.htm, or contact our Nominations Manager, Lynda Baxter, at nominations@stc.waterloo.on.ca.

As I've said before, the health of the chapter and our ability to provide stimulating programs of interest to you, our members, rests solely on the volunteers we are able to attract. *



Spring is in the air - and things are getting ready to bloom! Among these things are our new and returning council members and committee volunteers.

Now is the time to spread your seeds, plant your roots, and nurture your skills and expertise. If you haven't already volunteered, check out the chapter website at www.stc.waterloo.on.ca for a list and description of all positions. Take the opportunity to talk to council members and committee volunteers to find out where your skills can be of use.

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Structural Change

The changing face of technical communications

by Jonathan W. Baker, STC, Director/Sponsor Region 1

United Nations

Believe it or not, the term United Nations was actually coined by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in a bathtub. Churchill was in Washington over the New Year's holiday 1941-42 and the two men were struggling with what to officially call their alliance. The term alliance was unacceptable in a formal document because, according to Churchill, it posed constitutional problems for Roosevelt—evidently a formal alliance would require Senate approval. Neither liked the alternative Associated Powers.

On the morning of January 1st 1942, Churchill, who was staying in the White House, was taking a bath when Roosevelt knocked on the door, was wheeled into the bathroom, and proposed the term United Nations. Churchill instantly liked the term, recalling some lines from Byron's Childe Harold:

Here, where the sword United Nations drew,

Our countrymen were warring on that day!

And this is much—and all—which will not pass away.

Later that day Roosevelt and Churchill, along with representatives of the Soviet Union and China signed the United Nations Pact, pledging to fight Germany, Italy, and Japan to the last and to make no separate peace. Eventually twenty-two other nations signed the agreement and the name was taken later on for the post-war international organization.

One of the things on my mind these days concerns the issue of whether we are seeing structural changes in the technical communications business or whether things really are OK and once the economy improves we'll all be back at work. One of the reasons that I am inclined to lean towards the structural change point of view is that in the last several weeks I've heard from different people who are concerned about technical communications jobs migrating to other countries. I have no facts to verify this, but I do have questions and would be interested in hearing from you about what changes you are seeing in the business.

One of the long term concerns, if structural change is taking place, for STC, would be that our U.S. membership might decline, while our international membership would continue to grow. This has a raft of implications for Society. So, again, let me know what you think about this possibility. Does it worry you? Do you want to see STC become a true international organization? Is this a win-win situation for the membership? How do we get there?

Even if things are not changing structurally, we are seeing changes. Should the economy kick into high gear tomorrow, for many of us things are already different. During this recession many of you have: chosen to retire, early or otherwise; changed careers; retooled your career for other aspects of technical communication; or simply held on. However, the long term issues remain, technical communicators are a greying group with dwindling numbers. New technical communicators are not pouring into the field. So again, I ask, what are your thoughts about this? Will

all technical communicators be in the geriatric ward soon? Does STC need to think differently about what it offers based upon the notion that we are an aging, diminishing group? Please let me know what is on your mind.

One other interesting aspect to all of this, is that product documentation represents a tiny fraction of what is wrong or broken with a product. At a recent Boston Chapter Software Process Improvement Network meeting, Capers Jones, an expert in software process improvement, indicated that less than 5% of all problems with software can be identified as belonging to documentation. Pretty astounding. We do our job so well that our clients may be thinking we aren't needed or at the very least doc is easy to do. Not!

Last issue, change. We are in a period of huge change and transition. How are you faring? Do you think you are weathering the storm? Will you have a successful outcome? Have you done the planning you need to survive and thrive? Let me know how you are doing. This is a time we should be banding together and helping each other work through these miseries. *



Heidi Thiessen Memorial Award Recipients

And the award goes to...

by Christy Simard, Scholarship Manager



There is no question—it is expensive to be a student these days. Despite significant increases in tuition, funding levels have largely remained the same since the mid nineties. Add a sprinkle of life's excitement, like international exchanges, getting married, or making a career change, and what student wouldn't appreciate a free STC membership and a cool cash award?

On March 4th, at the annual STC wine & cheese, three university students received the Heidi Thiessen Memorial Award for student technical writing:

First Place: Joanna Duong

Second Place: Patrick Murtha

Third Place: Diane Russell

Joanna's entries included conceptual information, task-based materials, and back-up notes for a live technical demonstration. The judges were struck by how each sample showed a clear awareness of purpose and audience and used effective information structures. Joanna was excited about her free STC membership and plans to use the thousand-dollar award to fund an exchange trip to Europe this summer.

At the awards ceremony, we learned more about Joanna's academic program: a Bachelor of Math in Business Administration and Systems Management at the University of Waterloo. Students in this program work at the intersection between technology and business systems—and they tend to do a lot of writing. Perhaps this will be a new hotbed for technical writing talent!

Patrick's entries included two user guides for locally-produced hardware and software. His samples showed a talent for selecting and framing information appropriately. They also illustrated a mature commitment to articulating both actions and results in task-based material. In his fourth year of study in the Rhetoric and Professional Writing program at the University of Waterloo, Patrick is about to cut loose from academia with his new wife. We hope the free STC membership and five hundred dollar award will smooth the transition.

Without co-op experience to draw on in preparing her submissions, Diane took matters into her own hands. Based on her experience and expertise, she prepared two brochures for distribution in clinical settings. The judges applauded Diane's initiative and recognized an effective voice captured in plain language. Now in her final year of study at Wilfrid Laurier University, Diane will take advantage of her free STC membership and has already attended a variety of STC events.

If you didn't join us in celebration at the annual wine & cheese, you really missed out. All three winners attended. We got a little networking in and they shared a few words of thanks and enthusiasm.

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Upsydaisy

This is pretty much a nonsense word that exists in a wide variety of forms and spellings. Upsidaisy dates to 1862. Up-a-dazy is older, dating to 1711. The original meaning is the same as today, an exclamation encouraging a child to get up. It's almost certainly influenced by lackadaisical and alack-a-day in structure, but there is no apparent semantic connection.

Other variants include: oops-a-daisy and whoops-a-daisy.

Polishing Your Pictures

Getting graphic with technical information

by Elaine Ruddock, Education Committee Manager

Plan on attending this one-day workshop offered by one of our chapter "favourites"—Patrick Hofmann!

In our technical documentation, online help, and interface designs, our pictures always seem to play second fiddle to our words. We find them too hard to illustrate; we encounter too many resolution and incompatibility issues, and we can never seem to make them attractive enough and meaningful enough.

In the **Polishing Your Pictures** workshop, we will get very graphic (ew, bad pun) with these challenges. We will spend a day visualising instructions, sharing common problems, and working on some neat hands-on exercises. The key learnings include:

- how to visualize as you write
- how to illustrate instructions with the same concern for usability as we have with writing, how to use visuals to downsize your word-count
- how to make your visuals consistent
- how to repurpose and 'transport' your visuals to other media and formats.

In the end, the workshop's goal is to help you boost the visual language and usability of the information that you produce.

As a Visual Interaction Designer, Patrick Hofmann is "*a man of few words.*" At Quarry Integrated Communications in Waterloo, he builds award-winning visual design strategies to improve online, hardcopy, and interface information.

When?

Wednesday, May 28, 2003

Where?

The Pines Banquet Facility (formerly the Knotty Pine Restaurant)
115 Fountain Street, South
Cambridge, ON

Time?

Continental Breakfast – 8:30 am
Workshop – 9:00 am – 4:00 pm (lunch included)

Cost:

\$165.00/ members \$225.00/ non-members

Information?

To register, please contact Elaine Ruddock, Education Manager at 519-239-3382 or atlascommunications@rogers.com. *

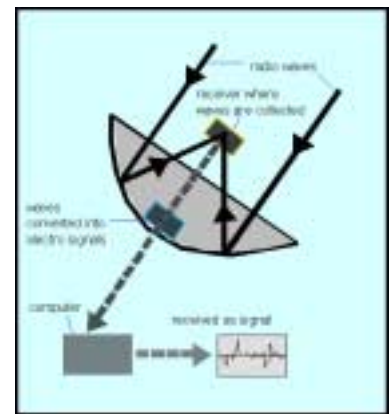
Uncle Sam

The most famous image of Uncle Sam is from James Montgomery Flagg's WWI recruiting poster. But Sam was not the creation of Flagg. Uncle Sam predates Flagg's poster by over a century and is the product of a different war.

The earliest surviving use of the term is from the Troy, NY Troy Post of 3 September 1813:

'Loss upon loss,' and 'no luck stirring but what lights upon Uncle Sam's shoulders,' exclaim the Government editors, in every part of the Country ... This cant name for our government has got almost as current as 'John Bull.' The letters U.S. on the government wagons are supposed to have given rise to it.

But legend has it that the name derives from a real man. Samuel Wilson, so goes the legend, was a meat inspector in the service of the federal government whose task it was to approve the quality of meat bought by the army. Workers handling barrels of meat stenciled with "US" questioned what the cryptic phrase went. The joke went up that it stood for Uncle Sam Wilson. There, unfortunately, is no evidence to support the story.



Making a Case for Technical Documentation

May general meeting

by Shannon Hilker, Program Manager

Making the business case for technical documentation Senior executives look at numbers, sales forecasts, and live by ROI. Promoting technical documentation on its intrinsic merits is not enough to inspire CXOs to invest in documentation—or more commonly, prevent them from downsizing their documentation groups. It takes the hands-on efforts of the documentation manager and team to provide defined, measurable value (ROI), demonstrate the ability to deliver usable documentation with budgetary constraints, and always ensure documentation goals reflect those of the organization.

Topic Description

Mark Sangster, Senior Manager, Software Documentation at Research In Motion will discuss:

- understanding corporate change in Waterloo hi-tech
- strategies for demonstrating the value of good documentation
- getting visibility at the top of the organization
- delivering on-time and on-budget
- setting goals.

Mark Sangster has spent the majority of his career working in high-tech marketing and technical documentation. As Senior Manager, Software Documentation at Research In Motion, he is responsible for a team of writers, editors and illustrators who support numerous handheld, server, and developer products, including RIM's popular BlackBerry wireless handhelds.

Prior to joining RIM, Mark worked for PixStream Incorporated, and lead his documentation team through Cisco Systems' acquisition of PixStream. He has also worked with several notable start-ups, including Sandvine Incorporated and Video Locus, and their venture capital firm, Tech Capital Partners. He holds a bachelor of psychology from the University of Western Ontario, and a Certificate of Technical Writing from Humber College. *

Heidi Thiessen Memorial Award Recipients

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We will keep in touch with this impressive group over the coming year and let you know how their careers develop. In the meantime, congratulations to each winner of the 2003 Heidi Thiessen Memorial Award. And, thank you to the members of the judging committee for volunteering your time and giving your careful attention to each entry.

Stay tuned for our next student award presentation, which we will make in June at our year-end BBQ. We will award the top academic performer in the Fanshawe College Technical Writing program with a free STC membership and five hundred dollars.

*Please join us for the celebration, and remember, it will be a great chance to meet your newly elected council. *

Hooligan

Hooligan almost certainly derives from the name Houlihan or O huallachain, but the specific person whom the term originally referred to has been lost to the ages. There are various explanations as to particular individuals. Often suggested is a Patrick Hooligan and the Hooley gang who (separately) terrorized a section of London in the 1890s.

An 1824 play (predating either of the above explanations) has a rough character named Hooligan. Since it was a practice of the theater to name characters after words that described their qualities, it is likely that the term existed at this early date.

From Writer to Illustrator

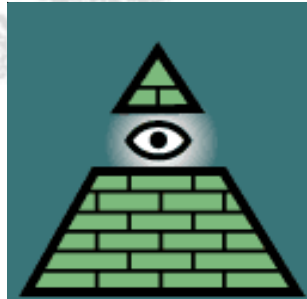
Applying technical writing theory to visual information

by Patrick Hofmann, Member

Peanut/Peanut Gallery

Peanut Gallery is American slang dating to 1888 referring to the balcony section of a theater—presumably from *hoi polloi* eating peanuts in the cheap seats. The term was popularized in the 1950s by the television show *Howdy Doody*, in which the host Buffalo Bob would call the child audience the peanut gallery. In doing so, Buffalo Bob was combining two different slang traditions.

Peanut is also slang for something small or inconsequential. This use dates to the 1930s. By 1942, the word was being used to mean a small or inconsequential person, or a child. This is the origin of name of Charles Schulz's comic strip, and *Howdy Doody* got mileage out of both senses of the term.



For technical authors, writers, and developers of hardcopy and online information, one persistent challenge is to augment and balance the textual information with meaningful visuals. Unfortunately, not all technical writers have a graphic artist or technical illustrator in their teams. If they do, the artist or illustrator is often either:

- a draftsman or engineer who produces complex technical illustrations, schematics, or exact representations of physical objects
- a graphic artist who produces stylised conceptual graphics that meet the requirements of the corporate style guide.

Either way, the result is often the same: the visuals do not meet the requirements of the user or reader. As technical authors and writers, we invest considerable time and effort in crafting instructions and information so that they are meaningful and memorable to the reader. Why do we not do the same for visual information?

To address this question, one could recruit a technical illustrator or graphic artist and teach them the values and virtues of technical writing: to optimise the visual information so that finding, reading, absorbing, digesting, and learning is maximised. Conversely, as technical authors and writers, we could learn the skills of basic illustration and visual design.

Whatever the approach, the mission is identical: by applying our values and virtues to visuals, we become the architects of both the textual and visual information in our documents.

But what values and virtues of technical writing can we apply to visuals? They include the following:

Keep it brief. In writing, we try to simplify our wording and include only what is vitally necessary, so that our message is as easy to read as possible. Likewise in illustrations, if we include only what is vitally necessary to the message of the illustration, we eliminate *visual traffic*.

Make it task-oriented. In writing, we aim to make our instructional information as actionable as possible. Likewise in illustrations, we should spend less time conveying the object in its anatomically perfect form, and instead, illustrate the object so that it clearly conveys an instruction.

Be consistent. In writing, we use wording conventions and structures that bring consistency and expectation to our text. Likewise in illustrations, we should be consistent with sizes, angles, views, and so on. By repeating a common illustration and making slight modifications to it, we bring consistency to the document and we amplify the change in meaning between illustrations.

And these are just three basic, high-level rules that only begin to scratch the surface. By applying such rules to visuals, not only do we improve the value of visual information in our documents, we improve the value of our role in the production of our documents. As technical writers and authors, we can become advocates, ambassadors, and architects of meaning in visuals. Whether in words or in pictures, we are the *maximisers of meaning* for the information.

As a Visual Interaction Designer, Patrick Hofmann is “a man of few words”. At Quarry Integrated Communications in Waterloo, he builds award-winning visual design strategies to improve online, hardcopy, and interface information. *

Poindexter

Poindexter has been an American slang term for an egghead or nerd for decades, but how did the name come to be associated with really smart people. The answer is cartoons. The cartoon character Felix the Cat, creation of Otto Messmer, made his screen debut in 1919, making him one of the most venerable animated characters in existence.

In 1958, Felix made his television debut and for the TV series Felix's new animator, Joe Oriolo, introduced a number of new characters and foils for Felix. Among these were Felix's archnemesis The Professor and his brainy nephew, Poindexter. Allegedly, Oriolo named Poindexter after his lawyer. The popularity of the cartoon ensured that the name Poindexter would be forever associated with intelligence.



STC
Student Chapter
London, ON

You're invited...

What?
XML for Technical Communicators
with Dwight Baier of FrontRunner

When?
Saturday April 26th
10 am - 12 pm

Where?
Fanshawe College, Rm B1073
Oxford St., London, ON

Admission is free. Coffee and refreshments will be served.

Managing Your Future

How to keep market ready

by Shannon Hilker, Program Manager

Reprinted from the Quill, February 2002

Cloud Nine

Cloud Nine is of unknown origin or significance. It is an Americanism dating to the 1950s—other than that we don't know anything of its origin.

Various tales have been attached to the phrase due to the number nine. But are certainly false because in the phrase's early days other numbers were often used, most commonly seven, sometimes thirty-nine. A 1930s quote uses Cloud Eight to refer to being drunk (which hints that the phrase may be considerably older than the 1950s). The probable meaning is simply a generalization of "out there" with no specific intent.



"With today's unstable economy, it's a good time to ask yourself: Am I market ready? Think about it. Could you survive company downsizing? Are your skills and contacts up-to-date? Would you know how to begin a new job search? Do you know what "they" are looking for?" To find out what you can do to protect and better yourself, read on!

Our panel of experts, lead by Sherry McMenemy (of Descartes) included:

Judy Newel – a veteran technical communicator and manager, who found herself asking these same questions when she was laid-off, but is now pursuing contract work

Deb Maskens – Vice President, Interaction Design at Quarry who recently left Quarry to do consulting and teaching at Fanshawe College.

Bill Christie – founder of Wellington Partners, and career counselor of 20 years.

What follows is a list of Dos and Don'ts compiled from the meeting discussion, organized into four categories: What You Can Do Right Now, Networking, What You Can Do After a Lay-off and During the Interview.

What You Can Do Right Now

- Take as many courses as you can – keep current with new skills
- Join committees that are outside of your job function
- Meet new people - networking takes a lot of evils out of your resume
- Don't leave (a job) too early or stay too long (3-5 years)
- Get hobbies outside of work
- Build up a self-image that has nothing to do with work
- Work on your resume before you need a job – add to it whenever you've completed a new course, done something new, achieved success
- Stay in the loop – know what your managers/supervisors current department mandates and long-term goals are – stay tuned in on what the big picture goals and make sure you are active in their solutions
- Communicate with your manager – insist on constructive feedback and performance reviews. If you sense a problem, don't let small issues fester – deal with them
- Don't devalue your skills (other people are doing that for you)
- Build and manage a portfolio – compile and track work highlights, newsletter highlights, accomplishments, etc.

- Self promote yourself – tactfully make your boss aware of your contributions
- Make sure you know your current worth on the market – check industry/ association job websites, talk to headhunters that work in your market
- Go on interviews – test the waters (keeps you job market ready)

Networking

The majority of jobs are attained without a resume.

- Start before you need a job!
- Professional networking – get involved in work related organizations doing volunteer work
- Do volunteer work for charities and other organizations
- Find people who support you (not necessarily from work)
- Stay in touch with people who leave your company (and when you leave, leave on good terms and stay in touch)
- Talk to your neighbors – really!
- When you meet people talk about what you do
- Remember that networking is only as good as what your contacts know, understand what you want and convey it so they understand

What You Can Do After a Lay-off

- Hurry up and slow down – you can't move forward until you understand where you have been
- Give yourself a full assessment – identify strengths, likes, dislikes, potential paths and options
- Rebuild your self-confidence - look at what you've done and understand the value, and don't forget about your soft skills
- Zero in on your core interests, then identify organizations that fit those interests
- Write a great cover letter – it is the piece that explains your fit with the organization in their language – it is the only original piece of writing

During the Interview

- Prepare for interview – the worst place to think is the interview (Career detailing – take key function pieces from your job, then break them into more detail, look for accomplishments – what did you do well, what did you improve)
- Look to build a relationship/rapport with the interviewer
- Don't ramble – answer the question and then shut up
- Don't be early or late – be on time
- Don't worry about being nervous, the interviewer expects you to be
- Remember the interviewer wants you to be the right person
- Be tough on the interviewer, find out what is important to you
- Ask about the environment – ask probing questions, ask for a tour, or the opportunity to talk to another employee
- Send a post-sell, thank you letter. *

Red Herring

This term for deliberate misdirection comes from hunting. Poachers would interpose themselves between the prey and the hunting party and drag a red herring across the trail to mislead the dogs. This would give them the opportunity to bag the prey themselves.

A red herring was chosen because dog trainers often used the pungent fish to create a trail when training their hounds. The dogs, upon encountering the herring scent, would follow that trail as it was the one they had been trained with.

What is the Quill?

The **Quill** is the official newsletter of the Southwestern Ontario chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). The Quill is published in Waterloo, Ontario monthly, except in January, July, and August, and distributed free to all local STC members. Material in this publication may be reprinted, provided the author and the Southwestern Ontario chapter of the STC are acknowledged. All readers are welcome to submit short articles, letters, and other interesting items relevant to technical communication to the editor, acb@campana.com. Please submit items by one week prior to the date of the general meeting.

Who are the Quill?

Editor: Andrea Braniff
Copy editor: Andrea Steinhauser
Word Puzzles: Andrea Braniff
Print manager: Andrea Braniff
Print editor: Shannon Hilker
Distribution: Barbara Girling
Comic strip artist: Vacant

Contributors

Ted Edwins, Jonathan W. Baker, Christy Simard, Elaine Ruddock, Shannon Hilker, Patrick Hofmann

Advertising

To submit advertising, please consult with the editor, acb@campana.com. Advertising combining text and graphics *must* be supplied in graphic format.

Business card \$10

1/4 page \$30

(\$20 for 3 or more issues)

1/2 page \$40

(\$30 for 3 or more issues)

Full page \$80

(\$60 for 3 or more issues)

STC Southwestern Ontario Council Contacts for 2002-2003



Executive

President

Ted Edwins
tjedwins@mgl.ca
519.822.2417

Vice-President

Vacant

Past President

Lynda Baxter
bbaxter@golden.net
519.836.0834

Treasurer

Carol Lawless
carol.lawless@clarica.com
519.888.3900

Recorder

Christa Bosse
christa.bosse@clarica.com
519.888.3900

Activity Managers

Auxiliary Mailing List Co-ordinator

Barb Girling
barbg@writeme.com
519.893.1134

Competition Manager

Vacant

Education Committee Manager

Elaine Ruddock
atlascommunications@rogers.com

Email List Manager

Paul Kostiuk
pkostiuk@spicer.com
519.748.4575 ext 258

Employment Manager

Heidi Marr
heidi.marr@peergroup.com

Hospitality Manager

Leo Petipas:
carolburrows0805@rogers.com
519.744.8449

Membership Manager

Martin Eberl
meberl@sympatico.ca

Program Manager

Shannon Hilker
smh@campana.com
519.747.5222 ext 263

Public Relations Manager

Debbie Kerr
canhot@alumni.uwaterloo.ca
519.821.9808

Quill Editor

Andrea Braniff
acb@campana.com
519.747.5222 ext 277

Scholarship Manager

Christy Simard
christy.simard@peergroup.com

Volunteer Co-ordinator

Lori Shantz
lori.shantz@sympatico.ca
519.741.7824

Webmaster

Stephen Burke
sburke@spicer.com
519.748.4575 ext 266

Special Interest Groups

Management SIG Co-ordinator

Vacant

Online SIG Co-ordinator

Vacant

Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG Co-ordinator

Elaine Garnet
2egarnet@rogers.com

Academic Liasons

Faculty Liaison, Fanshawe College

Otte Rosenkrantz
orosenkrantz@fanshawec.ca
<http://gs.fanshawec.on.ca>

Student Liaison, Fanshawe College

Catherine Haycock
catherine_haycock@hotmail.com

Faculty Liaison, University of Waterloo

Deb Maskens
dmaskens@ucentricity.com

Student Liaison, University of Waterloo

Vacant

Faculty Liaison, Wilfrid Laurier University

Dr. J. David Black
dblack@wlu.ca