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in recognition of work of outstanding merit that promotes excellence in technical communication across national boundaries. TCeurope selected the European Space Agency's Concurrent Design Facility (ESA CDF) as this year's winner. I am delighted to say that Andrew Pickering, the person who accepted the award at the Colloquium on behalf of the ESA CDF, is also a member of the ISTC.

Projects

The Colloquium also provides an opportunity to present TCeurope projects to interested parties. Current projects include developing a European code of good practice for technical communicators and a set of technical communication guidelines for complying with the European Machinery Directive. If you would like more information about these projects or you would like to contribute, please contact me using the email address provided at the end of this article.

Find out more

You can follow what is going on by joining TCeurope's LinkedIn group "TC in Europe". Volunteers are always welcome. Projects may provide ISTC members with opportunities to collaborate with other Europeans on a variety of subjects. This is a potential source of CPD points (see page 14)! C

References

TCeurope www.tceurope.org

Presentation material, Colloquium 2013 www.tceurope.org/colloquia/11-2013brussels

TCeurope projects www.tceurope.org/projects

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UA Europe 2013

Alison Peck attended this popular conference held in Manchester on 12-13 June and shares what she found.

I have wanted to attend a UA Europe conference for a few years now, but location and timing have conspired against me. This year, a gap appeared in my schedule and I just managed to register before the 'early bird' offer finished.

The venue was the Hilton Hotel in central Manchester – very light and airy (as you can see from the photograph of the reception desk) with good facilities for such an event. I cannot comment on the accommodation, as I combined attending the conference with a visit to see my son, but the food at lunchtime was extremely good.

In terms of pre-conference communication, I was impressed. All delegates were sent a pre-conference questionnaire that attempted to identify our particular areas of interest, and asked whether we would prefer a printed copy of the slides or an electronic copy. My USB flash drive was waiting for me on arrival, and our questionnaire answers were both encoded onto our name badges (so we could find like-minded individuals) and used to provide 'topic tables' at lunchtime, when we were invited to sit at a table displaying a topic we were interested in discussing.

Getting started

Matthew Ellison welcomed us all and kick-started the proceedings by sharing an eye-opening statistic: people from 23 countries were attending the conference!

The opening keynote was a thought-provoking session from Tom Johnson (whose blog - *I'd rather be writing* – is on my 'must read' list). Tom suggested

Figure 1. Georgette Ellison and the team waiting to welcome delegates to the conference.
Photograph courtesy of Jean Prince

that no matter how we categorise the content we create (when creating a table of contents, for example), others may wish to combine it in a different order to suit their own needs. Tom suggested that semantic tagging may help people both search (looking for something specific) and browse (finding things they 'didn't know they didn't know') but also conceded that a strong guiding narrative may lead to a meaningful table of contents in some cases. Definitely food for thought, and if you want to hear a podcast of the talk for yourself, visit Tom's blog.

My main difficulty after the keynote was in trying to decide what to attend, as the conference continued in two streams, with the second stream on the Wednesday dedicated to XML-based topics. I cannot cover every presentation in this short review, so I will concentrate on those that particularly resonated with me.

Creating workflow paths

One of the issues that Tom identified during his keynote was that there are many different paths users want to take through the topics we have created, depending on what they are trying to do, their level of experience and – in some cases – what else they are trying to do.

Leah Guren took up this theme brilliantly in the next session I attended – taking individual task-based topics and creating workflow paths from them. This made perfect sense to me: how effective an instruction is depends on where you are when you start to follow it. Leah's example was a simple one, but one that I struggle with regularly: I know how to answer a call on my mobile phone, and I know how to look up a phone number in my contacts… but I do not know how to do the latter *while* doing the former.

I am not sure how I am going to implement this – or even if I can, just yet – but I find I am looking at the way I organise topics from a slightly different perspective.

Translating screenshots

Adrian Morse of Picis shared a technique for translating the text on screenshots without needing to recapture the screens. He clears the first-language screenshots of text and adds variables in its place, in text boxes. These variables can then be mapped to translated text that is initially held in a spreadsheet.

There are pros and cons compared to the traditional methods of either capturing screenshots for each language version independently or of 'faking' the screenshots using an image editor. This is not a 'quick fix', but the work to prepare the images only needs to be done once and the translations can be in as many languages as are required.

I rarely write material that needs to be translated in this way, but I found myself wondering if I could adapt the technique to use more consistent data in my screenshots.

Keep the useful stuff

Something I identified as a recurring theme was that in our attempt to remove what we consider to be irrelevant, we must take care not to remove so much that what we're left with is useless. (This theme featured in Tony Self's *Context-agnostic writing for re-use* and again in Ray Gallon's *Applying cognitive science to user assistance*.) It is certainly something I have struggled with in the past, with some topics getting so sparse that what is left is hardly worth writing at all. Having someone actually say it made me mentally revisit the issue.

The highlight of the conference

This, for me, was the closing talk by David Crystal. I have long been a fan, since one of his books (*The Stories of English*) was the set book for an Open University course I studied some years ago. David injects humour into what could otherwise be a rather dry academic subject, and the topic of his talk this time was his latest book: *Spell It Out*. This provided a very entertaining and satisfying end to the conference.

So, what was the verdict?

Anyone who knows me knows that I am a 'learning junkie', and UA Europe 2013 certainly did not disappoint. As a freelance technical communicator, I view attending conferences as an investment in myself and in my business, and I am confident that what I learnt at UA Europe will be useful to me in the months ahead, even though a lot of my current work involves writing more 'traditional' manuals.

Will I go again? If my schedule permits, definitely. I have already heard that next year UA Europe is going to Krakow, a beautiful city that I visited quite recently and would love to see again. C

Reference

I'd rather be writing
http://idratherbewriting.com
The UA Europe website:
www.uaconference.eu
Crystal, D (2005) *The Stories of English*, Penguin
Crystal, D (2012), *Spell It Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling*, Profile Books

DIARY DATE
UA Europe 2014
5-6 June 2014
Krakow, Poland
www.uaeurope.com

**Figure 2. Adrian Morse on screenshot translation.
Photograph courtesy of Paula Stern**

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Member news

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