



# Newsbrief

The Monthly Publication of the Mid-South Chapter, STC

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## Web Based Learning That Doesn't Get Stale

by Amy Hollister



**Sandy Schaeffer**, ThoughtWare's Chief Software Architect, has extensive and broad experience in virtually all aspects of application software development for commercial use.



Before co-founding ThoughtWare, Sandy spent 10 years with IBM as a Systems Engineer, serving as a regional vertical specialist for banking application product support. In this capacity, he provided marketing and technical support for IBM's high-end banking application products.

While appearing to be a tremendous advancement on the surface, one of the greatest failures in e-Learning today has been the low "return rate" value. The immediate high consumption-rate drops off dramatically after an initial period of use.

In this presentation, Sandy will cover the reasons **why** and **how** to overcome these obstacles.



The audience will:

1. Review a "state of the business" on e-Learning and present real statistics on usage over time and what drives usage.
2. Examine the organizational psychology that initiates and drives the decision to adopt e-Learning.
3. Compare and contrast different deployment and content models that can positively affect overall usage rate and mitigate drop-off.
4. Learn how to build a "best-case" rollout model that provides overall true "value add" to the learning population.

Join the Mid-South chapter as we welcome Sandy Schaeffer on **Monday, April 2nd** at the Pig-N-Whistle on Winchester. **Chapter Officer elections will also be held and will be prior to the speaker.** The meeting will begin at **6:00 p.m.** and a BBQ buffet will be offered for \$10 per person. 🍴

## Meeting Notes

by Amy Hollister

Local duo makes headlines...

### U of M Profs Study Wireless Web-Surfing

*Source: Mark Watson  
watson@gomemphis.com  
The Commercial Appeal—Tuesday,  
March 6, 2001—Business Section*

**Y**ou're probably reading this in a newspaper, a medium that's several hundred years old. Or perhaps you're reading it on

The Commercial Appeal's Web site, <http://www.gomemphis.com>. You're probably not reading this on a hand-held device such as a Palm VII or a Web-enabled wireless phone. Nevertheless, technology gurus expect people to increase their use of wireless devices to read more documents and Web pages. Two University of Memphis assistant professors are researching how that change in medium affects the message.

During the monthly meeting of the Society for Technical Communication Mid-South chapter, those academics, Mike Albers and Loel Kim, said they hope to learn how people use wireless devices and how they think about material presented in a wireless format.

"There's a whole lot of war stories and anecdotal evidence,

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but nobody is really sitting down in an academic format to verify those guidelines with empirical experience,” Albers said. A wireless device's screen contains a fraction of the visual space of a normal personal computer screen, Kim said, and the image shown on that fraction “is not just a small Web page that contains everything that the PC monitor shows.”

People using wireless devices must scroll around on a document and click to a related page more often, she said.



And Albers noted that people, under the best of circumstances, can remember only about seven facts at a time. Thus, a person may have difficulty solving a problem if he must view more than seven images to obtain the relevant information.

And the pattern a person constructs mentally about a subject—what Albers and Kim called a “mental model”—can be influenced by how the material is presented, Albers said.

Jackie Walters, Mid-South chapter president, said she and her colleagues regularly use wireless devices: “It's a tool we really couldn't do without.”

But she said the newer models, with enhanced memory and color, are much easier to use and more effective.

Albers and Kim are looking for 20-25 volunteers to participate in the study. The volunteers must have experience with hand-held devices, such as a Palm V, and must have experience with financial documents. They offer a small stipend for participants. To volunteer, send an E-mail to Albers at malbers@memphis.edu. 🐰

**Editor's note:**  
Mark Watson can be reached by dialing 529-5874, or by sending an e-mail to watson@gomemphis.com.



**What's New in Your World?**

*submitted by chapter members*

**A**my Hollister received good news two-fold: she landed a new job as a Technical Writer at ThoughtWare Technologies, Inc., and...learned that she will be a new Mom in November. Wow. Everything happens at once, huh?




**Alison Joyner** married Jim Masilak, a sports writer for the CA's DeSoto County edition, March 17th at St. Peter's Catholic Church with a reception following at the Plaza Club. Jim and Alison Masilak honeymooned in Rome, which was absolutely beautiful! Congratulations

Alison, we wish you all the best! 🐰

## Do We Have To Hide Behind The Words We Write?

by Rob Houser, Director-Sponsor

Have you looked at the computer section of your local bookstore lately?



The shelves are bulging with books that supplement the documentation (online and paper) that is currently shipped with the product. What are these books? Why are they so successful? Do these books have anything to teach us as developers of user assistance?

### What are these books?

The computer books that users buy in the bookstore are mostly a combination of strategy guides and “how to” instruction manuals. They tend to be written in a more informal (or even irreverent) tone than the official documentation. They provide instructions using common, everyday speech. They incorporate lots of graphics, including cartoons. They tend to have lots of tips and tricks highlighted throughout the instructions. And, unlike official documentation which tries to spin product problems as product features, they point out bugs, shortcomings, and work-around with delight.

### Why are they so successful?



Most of these books claim to explain more about the “real world” use of the product than the official product documentation, and perhaps

they do. These supplemental computer books explain how to get real work done using a product, not just how to use the product for its own sake. They provide examples of the final output; they provide scenarios that illustrate the successful use of the product; and they use the vocabulary of their users, not the product. The authors of these books can only provide such information because they have analyzed the way users work and organized the information about the tool within the context of the user experience. The computer books that users buy at the bookstore provide more direction and advice than the product documentation. Official product documentation lists all features often without ranking them by importance or usefulness; they often fall prey to explaining the underlying functionality in too much detail; and they try to explain every possible way to do every possible task. They are providing information, but not direction (or even instruction). In contrast, supplemental books point out the best way to do a task (rather than all of the possible ways). They focus on what users “really” need to know using the user’s language. Successful computer books act like a guide--pointing out the proper direction, calling attention to possible problems on the trail ahead, and making recommendations about how to reach the final destination.

Another interesting aspect of supplemental computer books is their tone. The authors of these books do not attempt to mask their personalities. Instead, they identify with the reader, building

a strong sense of trust. They use humor and frankness to encourage the users to approach the subject without fear of failure. They use a more conversational tone than is often found in traditional user documentation.

### What do these books teach us?

In most cases, I believe our users would like for us to step out from behind the words we write. They want us to help them get their work done; they want us to



provide direction and advice; and they want us to make our products approachable (and even interesting). We have to get closer to our users if we are to create truly successful user assistance. While many in our industry say they support investigating users, few are still investing the money and time in gathering real information about users, tasks, and environment. If we don’t know how users are working now, how can we provide a product that helps them get their work done successfully? We have to reflect the “real world” application of our products, or we lack credibility with our users. Once we know how our users work, we must provide direction and advice to help them use our product to do their work successfully. Too many products refuse to take a stand on how a task should be done. They provide multiple paths and vague signals to the users, not to accommodate different users styles but to avoid making any suggestion at all. I have heard too

many developers of user assistance say that they did not want to “restrict” the user's options when using the tool. Users don't want options so much as they want to get the job done. Of course, it is a good idea to provide shortcuts for experts, but for the majority of users, especially beginning users, we must provide more explicit direction about what needs to be done next and more useful advice about how to complete the task effectively. Finally, we should not forget how boring it can be to read and interact with user assistance. Users know that people created the product that they are using, yet we work hard to keep any personality out of our user assistance. While tone may not work for all audiences (especially international audiences), it does go a long way toward putting users at ease with the product. We don't have to take the common persona used in supplemental computer books of “us against them.” Rather, we can project a tone that says “you and I will get the job done quickly, effectively, and as painlessly as possible.” Take a look at the supplemental computer books in your local bookstore and see what kind of lessons you can learn from them. The market clearly thinks they are a good idea. 🐣

**Rob Houser, Founding Partner, User First Services, Inc.**  
 rob@userfirst.net  
<http://www.userfirst.net>

## Treasurer's Report

by Ferris Hooshmand

This chapter monthly financial report reflects the end of February, 2001.



**Cash balance** (at the beginning of Jan.-01) **\$1,608.79**

### Income

Interest on savings	\$3.82
Software sale on eBay	\$110.00
<b>Total Income</b>	<b><u>\$113.82</u></b>



### Expenses

Meetings (Speaker's lunch)	\$8.00
Scholarship Award	\$110.00
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b><u>\$118.00</u></b>

### Surplus or (deficit)

(Total income less total expenses) **(\$4.18)**

**Cash (cumulative) balance** **\$1,604.61**

The publication of the Mid-South Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is referred to as **Newsbrief**.

Its goals are to:

- Help create a sense of community among existing members and visitors
- Involve members and visitors more fully in professional development and service
- Attract potential members by making them aware of the benefits of chapter membership
- Provide a link between the University, Professors, students, and work-place professionals

### Publication Guidelines:

Submissions are encouraged, either as faxes or e-mails to the editor.

### Newsletter Contact:

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[awriter@midsouth.rr.com](mailto:awriter@midsouth.rr.com) or  
 (901) 434-8421

### Mission Statement:

The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences.

### Contributors This Month:

- Ferris Hooshmand
- Alison Joyner Masilak
- Emily Poe
- Tracy Snyder
- Robbin Walker



## Welcome New Members!

by Amy Hollister

I am pleased to announce that we are blessed with the bounty of more membership! Please join me in welcoming these new additions to the Mid-South chapter of STC:



### Emily Poe

Due in very large part to George Grider's amply demonstrated professionalism and commitment to STC, new member and native Memphian Emily Poe has a renewed interest in STC. Emily recently worked with George on a project at FedEx, and in that process she rediscovered the value of participation in STC.

With over eight years in the business (six as a technical writer and two as an editor), Emily, finds that her multi-disciplinary education and professional experience bring a unique approach to her current work. With a B.A. from the University of Memphis in Sociology and a Master's in Art Therapy from the University of San Francisco's Lone Mountain College, Emily worked initially in the counseling/human services/non-profit management realms in San Francisco and New York. Ultimately, a thirst for a more rational, logical, predictable, and lucrative line of work led Emily to her current calling. After studying writing and editing at Columbia University's School

of General Studies and work as an associated editor at the University's Graduate School of Business, Emily transitioned to the technical writing field while working at NORTEL in RTP, North Carolina. Since returning to Memphis in '97, she has worked at FedEx, Synchronics, and currently is working on contract at Harrah's IS Center in Memphis.



Emily finds that Technical writing is a satisfying and lucrative line of service that affords more than ample stimulation for both right and left-brain. She looks forward to continuing her professional evolution and association with STC, and thanks George for his very effective public relations skills.

### Tracy Snyder

Tracy has been a technical writer with eOn Communications for the past 14 months.



At eOn, she documents telecommunication products, including web-based software. Tracy enjoys her job because there are opportunities to work with so many people in the company and also because she became involved in the development of products. She reports problems and provides suggestions to eOn's Testing Department on the software that she writes about. For Tracy, it's exciting to see a change in a program because of a suggestion she made. Plus, it makes writing

so much easier! She particularly likes writing end user guides.

Previously, Tracy taught lower division English classes at both the University of Memphis and the former State Tech.

She received a B.A. from Union University in Jackson, TN, where she majored in Communication Arts with an emphasis in journalism and minored in English. Tracy also has an M.A. in English from the U of M with concentrations in Literature and ESL, plus a certificate in Technical Writing.

On a personal note, Tracy enjoys watching car races and teaching English to non-native speakers. She is a volunteer with Latino Memphis, an organization that provides free English classes to adults in the Memphis area.

Tracy is also getting married next month.



### Robbin Walker

Robbin is an Assignment Editor/Producer for WREG, New York Times Company, also known as Channel 3.

She is currently juggling a full-time work career and a part-time school schedule at the University of Memphis.

Welcome aboard to each of our new members. We look forward to getting better acquainted with you and hope to see you get involved in the Mid-South chapter of STC. 🐾

# Meeting Reminder

Amy Hollister, Editor



**What:** April (Dinner) Meeting

**When:** Monday, April 2nd  
6:00 p.m.

**Speaker:** Sandy Schaeffer

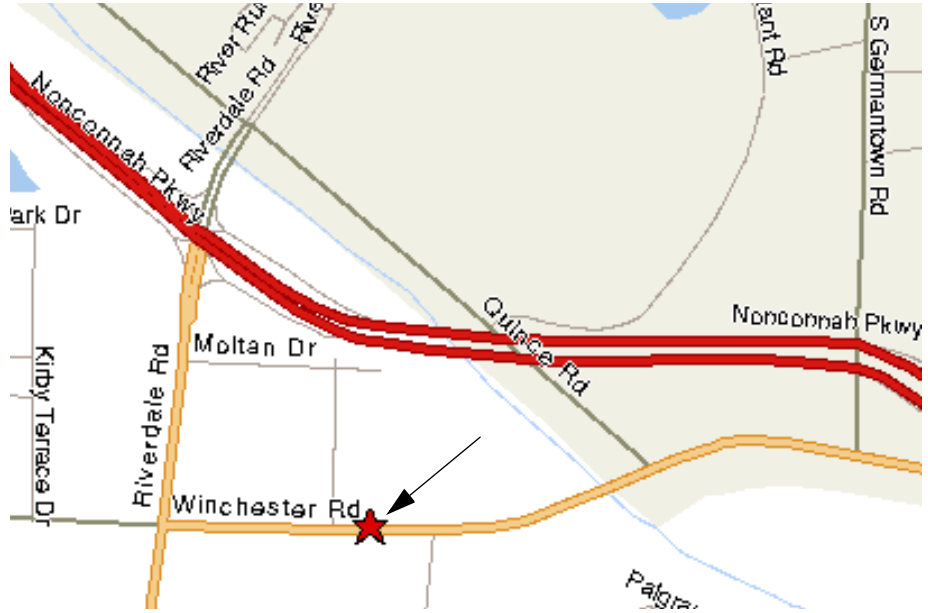
**Plus, Chapter Elections!**

**Where:** Pig-N-Whistle  
7144 Winchester Road  
(901) 754-4400

The planned menu and price  
(including tax and gratuity) is:

BBQ buffet  
Dessert  
Iced tea, water, or lemonade

**\$10.00**



society for technical communication

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