

43. Kirk St.Amant: Helping Users Understand

Tom Soto

Welcome to Beyond 1894, the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. I'm your host today. My name is Tom Soto. I'm the Digital Communication Manager in the Division of University Communications. Joining us on the podcast today is Dr. Kirk St.Amant, the Endowed Chair of technical communication here at Louisiana Tech.

Kirk St.Amant

Hey, Tom, thanks for having me.

Tom Soto

So Kirk, tell everybody a little bit about yourself. Um, what brought you to Louisiana Tech University?

Kirk St.Amant

Sure. Um, so I teach in the School of language and literature here at Louisiana Tech. And my area of specialization within that is technical writing, or what is called Technical Communication in many places. Like all academics, we've got areas of expertise within those and minor in health and medical communication, and in usability and design. So essentially, I study how individuals communicate about health and medical topics, both among groups and across groups, let's say patients and physicians, but I also focus on usability, or how effectively technologies like let's say personal healthcare devices, can be used by the audience for which they're designed. So what brought me to Tech was the opportunity to explore those kinds of areas within the framework that's here, particularly within the engineering culture. But the merger of arts and engineering that occurs at tech that I don't think really happens anywhere else that allows for that opportunity to blend liberal arts with physical sciences, engineering, and even business, as well as collaborate with education to look at how we can put that all together to better serve society in both how we communicate and how we design technology.

Tom Soto

So when it comes to health and medical communication, and usability, can you explain to people what exactly how the communication with say, how it goes with engineering, or business or whatever.

Kirk St.Amant

Think of it this way, whenever you write something, designed something, build something, you're often working from a mental blueprint that if you're cited, it's this is what this looks like. Or if let's say you're visually impaired, it could be this is what this object will feel like so people can recognize it, and understand it and use it reflexively. You know, no need for explanation. I see it, I know what it is, I know what it does. But that mental model is based on our experiences. And for individuals who have different experiences or use something in a different context. If they build according to those experiences in that context, then that doesn't necessarily mean it can be used outside of it. So let's say for example, you build something in a laboratory setting, and I'm going to use it in an emergency field condition. The fact

you design it for a laboratory setting might mean it simply can't be used outside of that context. So how do we avoid those kinds of disconnects? And how technology is built. And that not just technology itself? I mean, we're talking about writing in general, I write up a series of procedures based on how they occur in let's say, a hospital examining room. And as a paramedic out in the field, I've got to implement those same procedures to treat a patient in that in the field context, that disconnect is going to affect how I can use that written text to perform the related process. So that's kind of how we bring them together to study these things.

Tom Soto

So Are y'all are what you do? Is that training, let's say an engineer on how to write the instructions on how to use the tool? Or Are y'all preparing communicators to take to be able to sit down with the engineers and write this themselves?

Kirk St.Amant

For both engineers and communicators, it's helping them understand audience first and foremost, the thing you're creating, whether it's a written text explaining how to use something, or the thing itself, that people will use, who's the audience, or what we call the end user, who's actually going to operate the machine or read the text. It's making both our communications students and our engineering students aware of the fact that you're building for someone else. And because of that, you've got to figure out where are they going to be whenever they use it? What time of day, will they be using it at? Will they be busy and occupied? Or will they be free? What will their emotional state be like? Are they trying to juggle 1000 Different things while trying to say check their blood pressure with a self monitoring technology, or use your instruction sets to operate that particular technology. So it's all about learning to put your self in sort of the shoes of the other to understand what they need based upon the context or setting where they're going to try to use or perform something.

Tom Soto

So it's basically trying to cut out some of the jargon as well that we like to use. You know, if we're in that specific field, we we've got to be able to cut that out and bring the the communication the instructions or whatever, to the person and let them understand it.

Kirk St.Amant

I mean, think of it this way. It's one thing to have the engineer who built the technology there to explain it to you, and to watch you try to use it and teach you how to use it. It's another thing to just simply be given that technology until you figure this out on your own. Those are two very different contexts and for most As the world is moving towards, kind of self implemented or self operated technology, particularly in healthcare context, let's say, I'm the patient that it's if it's an insulin pump, or some sort of heart monitor, whatever it is, the task is on me to operate and use it to maintain my own health and wellness. Now to do that, I've got to be able to understand what it is what it does, and how to use it reflexively again. And that's kind of the big Hallmark that I know without thinking, it's just, it's a reflex, I know how to use it and use it correctly become the key parts. And that's the challenge, teaching someone who's walked a different life path, if you will, what the reflexive behaviors of another audience are, so you can build for design for them, or for the communicator, right for them, create images or infographics for

them, create web websites that help kind of meet their expectations and needs. That's the general end goal.

Tom Soto

Yeah, you brought up websites. And that's kind of my area. And so when I know when you and I get together, and we've talked about usability, accessibility, I completely understand, you know, we're trying to make the tools, whether it's a medical device, a piece of machinery, or a website, we're trying to make it to where anybody can be able to use it, to be able to understand it. So I think this is, you know, a pretty neat field, you know, when I first met you, several years ago was that I was very interested in this. Tell us a little bit about the Center for Health and Medical communication. I know you're the director of that. What exactly is it? How does it work with here at Tech? Does it work with the community?

Kirk St.Amant

Yeah, so the center is completely community driven. And the idea is to implement this idea of usability into the development and design of communication products. And again, by that I mean, everything from, say, written instruction sets, to infographics, to images on signs to websites. And the idea is to build off of usability and phase one, identify the audience, you're going to write something for design something for create something for phase two, identify what their actual need is, in relation to healthcare. Once you've identified that need phase three, what kind of information do they require, and in what format, so they can actually address that need. And then phase, the next phase becomes developing what we call a wireframe or a draft of the item that you wish to finalize, but then testing that draft with members of the actual community, in the context where they're going to use it in that setting, to figure out Does anything need to be revised, so they can use it very effectively and very quickly to meet that healthcare need. And then based upon testing again, with the intended audience, you create a finalized product. So we try to offer the center's services to focus on those kinds of dynamics. And again, the purpose is healthcare is an individualized community based activity. And the only way to effectively engage in health care is to have the kind of information in the format that you need to meet your lifestyle to access it when it's needed, and understand it and act upon it very quickly and readily. So you can maintain effective health and wellness. So that's kind of the center's overall goal. We've worked with everything from individuals within the city of Rushton to within Lincoln parish to the state of Louisiana, we've actually started to move outward into different regional collaborations, and I've actually some international collaborations around these topics. But the focus of it is the same. Who's the audience? What's the context? They're doing something in? What do they need in terms of their health and wellness objectives? And how do we present it in a way that they can use it and understand that effectively?

Tom Soto

Can you tell us about any projects recently that y'all have worked on? Give us some examples of those?

Kirk St.Amant

Well, we have a few of them going right now, we've got a collaboration with a nonprofit called the Louisiana Public Health Institute. And they're a nonprofit that focuses on distributing different kinds of

health care information to individuals in the state of Louisiana. And at the moment, we're working with them on developing a number of things. For example, we're creating webinars, one of which will be sort of on plain language and the design of information by understanding audience needs. We're also looking at developing webinars for the Louisiana Department of Health that look at things such as effective design of infographics or visuals so they can engage in those sorts of processes. Additionally, we have developed some preliminary materials, everything from initial surveys, to basic images in slide deck to help these different agencies share different kinds of information with the clients or the populations that they work with and try to serve effectively. So those are some ongoing both local and Louisiana wide projects. scope that out a bit. We've actually got a project with the international group called the forestry Stewardship Council, which is based out of Germany and that's kind of a part of environmental health, where the it You heard that the environment is a component in health care, and understanding effective practices in relation to the environment. In this case, forestry is a critical component to understand to maintain the wellness of the context setting situations where individuals live. So we're doing some user testing with that particular organization, to look at the design of its website to provide information to different client bases. Most recently, we've started to work with the University of Strasbourg, in France, to develop different kinds of informational posts for them that look at ideas of usability, accessibility and information, or information design, we call it how you create information so people can use it effectively, to meet their sort of end goals for the communities that they serve. So these are some of the different projects we're looking at at different levels. And we're always welcome to collaborate with individuals, because it's always going to be collaborative effort. We learn from them, they learn from us. And that's the key to making a center effective. It's a symbiotic relationship, where each learns from and helps the other grow, versus a unidirectional one where it's simply, I'll tell you what you need. And here it is, no, that's not usability, I need to understand your needs, and address them. And in so doing, learn more about what my preconceived notions of things are, so I can address them more effectively next time.

Tom Soto

This is a very interdisciplinary field, not only you know, you, you talk about working with the engineer and being able to explain the product, but you're also talking about infographics that could bring in our arts majors. You talked about business, you talked about forestry, I mean, there's a lot of different applications where the usability or user experience design comes into play. Now, you mentioned the University of Strausberg. Y'all recently, what had a conference, there's a joint conference with Louisiana Tech, University of Strausborg.

Kirk St.Amant

We've had a relationship between the two universities on an informal level for a number of years now. And we decided we both have an interest in usability and design. And I think from two very different sort of cultural perspectives, the North American perspective and the European perspective, or the Western European perspective. And we decided it would be great if we could get individuals from sort of both groups together in the same place and look at different ideas around this common topic of usability and user experience design. Forgive me, just to clarify, user experience design is the idea that you design something. So it meets the experiences or expectations of the user, the individual who uses something based upon their own personal experiences and background. We had originally planned it to be an onsite event back in 2019. And then we had a global pandemic, and everything shut down. And

thankfully, the individuals who are committed to presenting stayed with us. And we did it again this year, a few weeks ago, April 1, and second as a virtual conference. And the nice part about it is it actually brought together individuals from multiple nations, both in terms of presenters and attendees to look at what does this concept of usability mean? How can we address it? And now that we've all sort of approached the global pandemic in different ways, how can we use usability to move into post pandemic life in ways that are effective in terms of if you will, usable, this is a process I can use. This is a concept I can use. This is a technology I can use based on what the status of life is like now, and we're hoping to do it again next year. In fact, we've got plans to do it again next year as an on site conference. The goal is to match it with an onsite conference we have here at Tech called the Louisiana, excuse me, the LA tech usability studies symposium, or lattice. That's takes place in September. And again, it brings together individuals to focus on usability, and then have this partner conference in France in April, that looks at it from a different perspective, but to line them up together that way. Now, the irony of that, Tom, is the fact that you hear the train going by in the background, that's an environmental factor that needs to be built into the usability of something. We're creating a podcast, we know that there's a potential for background noise. And so the question is, how do we mitigate it or address it? And we're doing it right now, sort of by integrating it into the discussion we're having? So that's kind of usability on the fly, if you will.

Tom Soto

There you go. Now, the usability conference, you said that you're looking at having it again next year. And if I'm not mistaken, the intention was to alternate between here and the University of Strausberg. Is that correct? And so we hosted it recently, but it was online. So the next one will be in France. Is that correct?

Kirk St.Amant

We co hosted so we had a half of the half of the interrupters were here in the United States and the other half were in France or in Europe. Oh, well. In the virtual environment just made it easy to bring the two together in a zoom webinar. But the goal is starting ideally, in September, the first of these conferences will happen on site at the Academic Success Center and Bowser city that Louisiana Tech has. And then the parallel or follow up conference will happen in April 2023, at the University of Strasbourg, in France. And from that point on, if all works out accordingly, it will always follow that rotation, September or fall of one year in Louisiana, spring or April of the next year in Strasbourg, France.

Tom Soto

All right, well, I'll be there in the fall, I'm sure. And then, you know, I guess I gotta get a ticket to France next year,

Kirk St.Amant

We can find a way to make it happen right

Tom Soto

I've been once. And it was very interesting talking to different people. I believe the example on one of the talks I sat in on was, you know, using a blood pressure cuff, how to explain to the person at home,

or rather, you're the engineer, you build this, this blood pressure monitor? How do you explain to the person at home who has to use it in which, you know, we talked about earlier, and it's very interesting, because we apply a lot of the same fault, you know, when we're building websites, or working with digital, digital signage, social media, you know, making, or whatever we make, we need to make sure that it's, it's usable by all accessible ball. So that's something that we like to, you know, really hit hard on here in this office.

Kirk St.Amant

But I mean, that's a classic example of assumptions you make without realizing someone else's shoes, you and I might have a full range of color vision, with without thinking about, there might be someone out there who doesn't have that full range, you create a website design that's dependent on color, to use the thing. And suddenly you run across someone who does not see that full same range that we do, they can't use it, because they can't distinguish.

Tom Soto

We, that's one thing I like about my job is being able to, you know, while I'm not in the classroom, as an instructor, or professor, I do get to train the students here that work for us. And you know, they, they get, they get the educational experience in the classroom, and then we sit down and we talk to them about, you know, the little, some of the little things that may not be picked up in in their entry level classes. And it's really over the years, the students have told us it's really helped them out, as far as their studies go. And then when they leave here, they're able to bring a skill set to the job that other students aren't because they're what we do in our offices, we hire students, that if they're a graphic designer, we put them to creating digital signage slots, creating social media, graphics, creating websites print, and we have to work in the usability, the accessibility of all these things. And just last week, I had one of our students, she was making a slot for the digital signage, and it was, you know, using tech colors, which are awesome, I love them. But you know, we had to talk about the, the color contrast, you know, the red text on a blue background doesn't work. For somebody who's colorblind or you know, has a color weakness, and being able to use tools on my computer and show that to her, it was really eye opening.

Kirk St.Amant

Think about it this way. I mean, the end goal for all of us is to make usability, like writing. Most of us are taught writing from an early age. And we can do it reflexively. Because we understand things like we're writing for an audience, we understand how grammar works, except for myself, we've got a pretty good command of spelling. But the idea is, can we make usability, the same kind of reflexive set of assumptions. This is not designed for reading audience, but an end user who's going to make use of it somehow, when we put it together the same way we put together the words in a sentence to convey an idea. We put together the different elements of the interface, the different elements of the graphic, the different elements of the technology. So they go together very smoothly, and people can look at it and know exactly what it says. Or if you will, what it is, and then meaning understanding not only do I know what it is like a sentence, I know what it does, I know the information is trying to convey. And so that's one of the things we've been striving to do, both at the Center for Health and Medical communication through these usability focus conferences, but also in the technical writing program here at Tech, make this idea of usability a central factor, just as foundational as grammar just as foundational as spelling,

so that when students complete their studies, they know to think in terms of it automatically, versus considered an afterthought. One of the things you were mentioning earlier, Tom, is usability isn't keyed in one discipline. It's an interdisciplinary thing. And so as healthcare and health communication, it takes multiple individuals from multiple different disciplines to make this work. And so I think that's the key moving forward. And we're back to why tech, what was the draw the focus on interdisciplinarity on transdisciplinarity, if you will, that you can work with colleagues across different areas, whether it's art, like working with Nick Bustamante of Vista, whether it's psychology, working with Kacie Mennie in cognitive psychology, kinesiology, like Todd Castleberry, who runs the works in sort of tactical information there. And other disciplines, it's simply a matter of understanding on your own by yourself in your own discipline, you're not going to solve this problem, it's inherently got to be addressed at an interdisciplinary level. And tech makes that possible. And so it's one of the nice things about being here, both teaching it, researching it, and working with communities, the ability to tap those interdisciplinary networks, and make something really worthwhile to come out of the interaction. That's kind of what it's all about, right?

Tom Soto

I'm very appreciative of it. Recently, my wife and I, we had a little boy, and he has been diagnosed with an allergy. And, you know, the way this all comes into play is, we had to get an epinephrine injector, but it talks to you. So we don't know how to use it. As, as you as a user, daycare, passerby, whatever, when they open it up, it immediately starts talking to them, and given them the instructions on how to use it. So you know, that's what I've done over the years here at Tech, working with the website, working with social media and video and all, you know, it's kind of come back around to where what you're doing and what what people in your field are doing, are also helping me helping all of us. So I want to thank you for that.

Kirk St.Amant

Thank you for being patient with us as we learn, but also thank you for teaching me and my colleagues in our field. You know this again, this requires dialogue, not monologue. And if you can't be open to learning your shortcut shortcoming from someone else, then you're not going to be able to manage this successfully. So thank you and your family, for being patient with me and my colleagues to learn more about these things and try to address them.

Tom Soto

Well, Kirk, I want to thank you for being on the podcast today.

Kirk St.Amant

Thank you for having me. It's been great.

Tom Soto

Enjoyed it. Yes, everyone. Stay tuned for the next podcast. Want to thank you for listening. Go Dawgs.

Gavin Kelly

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