

Impressions from the STC Summit in Philadelphia

Contributed by
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Here are some very brief impressions of the sessions I attended at the STC Summit in Philadelphia, which took place from 2nd to 4th June 2008. Many of the presentations are available for download from the STC web site .

I hope the following glimpses of some of what went on at the STC Summit in Philadelphia will be of interest and may even inspire you to attend an STC Summit in the future.

Monday - Opening Keynote Speech - Howard Rheingold -fascinating and entertaining

Monday - (1) "Technical Communication body of knowledge" this is a serious attempt to describe everything we do - a "taxonomy" of the profession - so we can (a) create a portal to resources for every topic we can think of; (b) review the curriculum wherever TC is taught and see what could be added or improved (I do some teaching); and (c) if we ever decide we want to go down the "certification" route (a controversial suggestion, I know!) we will know the range of things that could be included.

Monday (2) "Become Robo-Like Efficient with RoboHelp 7" a very practical session (sponsored by Adobe) and an entertaining presentation, where I picked up a few hints and shortcuts.

Monday (3) "XML the easy way: moving your unstructured content to DITA" this was another Adobe-sponsored session, but there was much too much detailed information for a presentation - it should have been a practical workshop. But it's nice to know that this can be done.

Tuesday (1) "Writing as Asynchronous Conversation" for me this was the highlight of the conference. I am a big fan of Ginny Redish and in this session she touched on some of the topics from her book "Letting go of the words". The idea that we are always conducting a conversation with our readers or with the visitors to our web site is a valuable insight and a lesson we all could learn. I imagine that plenty of corporate sites won't let us implement Ginny's ideas just yet, though.

Tuesday (2) "Getting Inside Information on Collaboration" - a panel discussion with "collaborative content experts" - Char James-Tanny, Anne Gentle, Sarah O'Keefe, Kirsty Taylor, and Michael Priestley. Informative, enjoyable, and interesting

Tuesday (3) "So you can write. But can you think?" this was a very lively and entertaining practical session presented by Dawn Mason and Deborah Doyle about how we could apply the three standard DITA topic type classifications (concept, reference, and task) to the texts we've already written, and how that might make our writing more effective even if we don't (or can't) adopt DITA tools.

Tuesday (4) "Why open standards matter" (part of the globalization, localization, and translation institute) - more of the same - how following standards (such as XML and DITA) can really save you money when you need to translate and localize

Tuesday (5) "The art of the podcast" Tom Johnson of "Technical Writer Voices" revealed the secrets of interviewing, recording, editing and distributing podcasts - I found it fascinating.

Wednesday (1) and (2) - I was speaking at the Lone Writers SIG progression - a version of my presentation will be published separately

Wednesday (3) "Assessing the Usability and Usefulness of Tech-Mediated Communication" - another academic session for me with researchers from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. We all know that people are more likely to search on Google for a third-party forum than they are to call your tech support line. These people are investigating both why people do that, and what it is they prefer about "unofficial" sources of information. Your marketing team might not be so keen on "User-generated content" after they see the results of this research. Article will be published soon in Technical Communication".

I'm ashamed to admit that at this point I couldn't keep my eyes open so I missed the closing keynote speaker. Everyone who was there thought it was really worthwhile.