

The Resignation of a Technical Writer: A Hybrid Theory Interpretation

In the software workplace, technical writers straddle a role that is neither purely technical or purely non-technical.

Technical writers are often expected to possess a software development skill set rivaling that of software developers. For example, Google lists its technical writing jobs within the “Engineering” category of its employment website; one job listing seeks such in-depth software skills as: “EST, SAML, application integration; XSLT; TCP/IP network administration; network security; relational databases; HTTP” (Technical Writer, Software Engineering [Enterprise] — Mountain View, n.d.). Even a technical writing internship at Apple Computer lists two years of undergraduate computer science as a pre-requisite (Apple – Job Opportunities, n.d.).

Despite these rigorous technical qualifications, technical writers often lack the respect and full influence of software developers over product direction and implementation, and receive similarly secondary compensation (Clark, 2007). We can see the consequences of this disjoint through popular culture, such as through the Dilbert comic strip character Tina the Technical Writer, who “strives to maintain her dignity while surrounded by engineers who don't have a proper respect for her work.” (Dilbert.com — The Characters, n.d.)

To substantively understand this disjoint between technical writers and software engineering culture, we must look beyond popular culture and study actual technical communicators in the workplace. Thus, this paper will discuss the hiring of a principal-

level technical writer at a prominent Silicon Valley open source software start-up, and analyze the causes behind her rapid disenchantment and departure.

In this paper, we will explore what led this writer to depart her position by considering her experiences using a combined theoretical perspective that incorporates a social constructionist model of agreement into a larger cultural theory framework. With this lens, we will consider issues of community and culture.

Ruth's Tenure at SquareOne

Ruth (pseudonym), our writer, was recruited by a newly formed start-up (SquareOne; pseudonym) in the Fall of 2005 to initiate and lead its developer publications and user assistance effort. Although technical writing was not seen as an immediate need, her extensive background and reputation in the instructional design field qualified her as an “opportunity hire” for the company.

Ruth brought four main goals to SquareOne:

1. Designing and creating a set of effective end-user documentation from the start of the product development cycle.
2. Authoring documentation that improved communication between SquareOne and external (open source) community developers.
3. Providing a social role model in the company's formative stages, so that it would grow to be a socially responsible entity. (As the engineering department's only female employee — and its oldest employee by over a decade — Ruth felt especially interested in issues of inclusiveness across gender and culture.)

4. Constructing innovative forms of instructional design, such as photo and video slideshow-based help systems.

However, Ruth quickly encountered obstacles in achieving these goals.

Creating accurate and effective end-user and developer documentation required that developers provide accurate and stable information about the product's design and implementation. However, developers frequently made design and implementation decisions during midnight hacking sessions, and rarely related the outcome of their decisions. Thus, Ruth was left guessing the expected product behavior based on an unstable and constantly changing product prototype, and could not author accurate documentation for end-users or developers (personal communication, December 3rd 2006).

SquareOne's receptiveness to Ruth as a social role model also came into question. An open source contributor, Charlie Chun (pseudonym), posted to a SquareOne corporate mailing list graphically comparing a software utility he'd written to a serial rapist. After two SquareOne employees objected to this metaphor as inappropriate for a company mailing list, one company co-founder ordered employees to halt their public discussion and disagreement; a second company co-founder opened his communication with the question, "Are we finished publicly lynching Charlie Chun?" In the ensuing discussion, Ruth felt that the company's leadership was principally concerned with satisfying open source contributors, rather than functioning in a socially responsible fashion.

Without developer participation, Ruth's final goal of developing innovative help systems became clearly implausible, solidifying Ruth's decision to resign.

Barely eight months after she was hired, Ruth e-mailed the company to announce her resignation, explaining that "it has become clear to me that SquareOne doesn't really need a full time principal tech writer." In her personal blog, she explained:

"...in very short order, I realized that I would have *little influence* over SquareOne's development as a product and as an organization. *I want to be influential* in whatever enterprise I am part of, and I want to develop and learn." (Doe, 2006; italics added).

Introducing Social Constructionism

Our analysis will first apply the social constructionist approach presented by Mahalingam Subbiah (1997), which considers the creation of knowledge as a set of collectively held processes. In this approach, knowledge does not constitute bits of objective information generated independently by individual thinkers. Instead, knowledge is a product of shared values and beliefs of held by an originating community. Thus, people's thoughts and opinions are a product of their surrounding community, rather than pure expressions of self.

Although earlier social constructionist models viewed this communal knowledge-making process as inherently apolitical and morally detached, later interpretations distinguish between socially held beliefs and actual truths (Subbiah, 1997, p. 56).

Subbiah's social constructionist approach presupposes that "knowledge is constructed in communities by members who share beliefs, language, practices, and values." (Subbiah, 1997, pp. 57-58). Although knowledge-making may involve tension and struggle, knowledge is ultimately generated through community agreement, rather than individual actions. (Subbiah, 1997, p. 58).

We argue that this need to build agreement within SquareOne's developer community is what ultimately blocked Ruth's ability to function effectively as a writer.

Preliminary Analysis Through Social Constructionism

Before Ruth could begin to compose high-quality end-user and developer documentation, she first had to build agreement among the existing developer community. Without communal agreement regarding the value of such documentation, the required developer participation would not materialize. Despite Ruth's recognition and articulation of the benefits to SquareOne that would accrue from high-quality documentation, Ruth did not receive developer or management support in building agreement, and was unable to achieve agreement. (Perhaps the developer community was satisfied with their existing ad hoc communicative practices, and did not see sufficient immediate value to warrant radically reshaping them. The newly hired software test team, however, would not have agreed with this sentiment.)

Ruth did not face such obstacles in reaching agreement at prior employers. At these companies, the developer community's shared knowledge base was more likely to incorporate an awareness of the communicative practices necessary to support non-developer contributors. When Ruth did encounter obstacles in achieving agreement at

these companies, the value of her work was recognized and prominently supported by other stakeholders. Thus, little community reshaping was necessary to enable her full participation. However, perhaps since most members of the SquareOne developer community lacked such shared values and knowledge, Ruth did not receive significant support in her efforts to obtain agreement, leaving her in a role of isolated advocacy for her work.

Ruth also found herself surrounded by other shared values which she did not buy into; these disconnections illustrate the argument advanced by Timothy Weiss (1991) in advocating for a distinction between “socially justified beliefs” (pp. 37-38) and truths. For example, when Ruth objected to the aforementioned use of rape humor on a company-sponsored mailing list as sexist and harassing, only a handful of coworkers expressed an awareness or understanding of the harassing nature of such humor. Several employees even publicly acknowledged having contacted the offender to apologize to him for Ruth’s taking offense. This socially justified belief within SquareOne regarding the perceived innocuousness of such humor belies the reality that the majority of surveyed female participants in open source software development report observing or experiencing gender-based discriminatory behavior, with rape humor specifically cited as a frequent example (Krieger & Leach, 2006, p. 22).

These clashes between Ruth’s own values and those of the SquareOne community echo the dilemma presented by Subbiah. To what degree is a technical communicator responsible for actively reshaping an organization’s values, instead of reaching agreement at the expense of his or her own values? (Subbiah, 1997, p. 59).

In other words, should Ruth have considered it her responsibility to adopt the values of her organization whole-cloth, and to subjugate her own? Or, as a principal contributor, was it her responsibility to reshape the organization so that it reflected what she knew to be better ways of working?

Since Ruth was unable to shape SquareOne so that its communal values agreed with her own, she chose to submit her resignation. Shortly thereafter, she accepted a position at an employer whose culture incorporates high-quality technical communication as an integral part of its development process.

Insufficiency of Social Constructionism

Our social constructionist analysis offers a model to understand the obstacles that Ruth faced in introducing high-quality documentation and in advocating for a work environment hospitable to women. However, it fails to offer a complete explanatory framework for understanding Ruth's experiences.

First, our existing framework fixes the burden of responsibility in attaining agreement primarily upon Ruth. This assumption belies the complex web of exclusion and power that Ruth encountered at SquareOne.

Secondly, although our current model recognizes that a new community entrant with differing values faces a struggle to achieve agreement within the existing community, we fail to offer a mechanism to examine the roots of that struggle. Could we understand in more depth why Ruth faced resistance at SquareOne, but not at prior companies? And why was this resistance so insurmountable?

To consider these issues, we will add a second component to our theoretical framework: *cultural studies*.

Introducing Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is a research framework that loosely coheres around the following four themes (Thralls & Blyler, 2002, pp. 185-186):

1. Social practices carry political effects.
2. Culture is complex, and requires an interdisciplinary approach to be fully understood.
3. Ordinary and mundane aspects of everyday life are, in fact, neither ordinary or mundane.
4. Scholars are capable of not only studying, but changing social and communicative practices.

Because cultural studies could be better characterized as a broad movement rather than a precisely delineated framework, we will limit our consideration to the post-structuralist cultural studies approach described in Thralls & Blyler (2002). By employing this approach, we are now empowered to incorporate four issues into our study:

1. **Exclusion.** Cultural studies targets “issues of representation”, and gives “special attention to those individuals and groups that have been...excluded from participating in the process of constructing meaning” (Thralls & Blyler, 2002, p.

188). This issue of exclusion is crucial to our investigation: no single individual barred Ruth from equitable participation. Who (or what), then, did?

2. **Power.** Incorporating a cultural studies approach enables us to consider issues of power, and how a social practice may “empower some individuals while disempowering others” (p. 193).

Cultural studies empowers us to consider contributing factors and influences that extend far beyond the community contained within SquareOne’s corporate headquarters. The backgrounds and motives of the SquareOne developer community are rich and complex, and cannot be explained single-handedly through their status as SquareOne employees. More so, as an open source company, SquareOne’s extended development organization spans worldwide. Thus, it is even more crucial that our model heeds Longo’s assertion that “institutions where technical writing is practiced need to be reconstructed as cultural agents that are not necessarily bounded by any one organization’s walls.” (Longo, 2000).

3. **Positioned Research.** Cultural studies enables us to acknowledge that the “experiences and values” (Thralls & Blyler, 2002, p. 198) of the researcher alter the research results. In the case of this paper, the researcher is a former SquareOne employee, and a colleague and friend of the study’s subject. The author also maintains friendships with members of SquareOne’s staff, and carries a vested interest in maintaining amicable working relationships with all of SquareOne’s employees and management. Thus, this paper omits content that could be perceived as implicating individual employees in Ruth’s departure.

4. **Advocacy.** Cultural studies is built on a heritage of providing advocacy on behalf of that which is currently marginalized. Such advocacy commonly takes the form of published analyses for academics, or through employing participatory research methods (p. 201). Participatory research or academic publication is beyond our scope, nor do we intend to use this paper's results to affect change. We have also not written this paper with the intention of performing advocacy. Nonetheless, the author's personal ties to the individuals under study likely implies intentional or unintentional advocacy on their behalves.

Analysis Incorporating Cultural Studies

We will now integrate cultural studies into our existing social constructionist framework to build a richer understanding of Ruth's experiences. We will do so by considering three factors: broader cultural influences, power & knowledge legitimation, and the cultural theory concept of 'articulation.'

Broader Cultural Influences

Since SquareOne is an open source company, we must consider SquareOne not as an independent community, but as a product of a broader open source culture. Many of SquareOne's employees were recruited on account of their reputation within open source communities. These communities frequently privilege the task of writing code above tasks involving documentation, community organization, or user interface design.

(Krieger & Leach, 2006, p. 55)

From anecdotal evidence, many of the employees at SquareOne hired from an open source background had never collaborated closely with a professional technical writer or user interface designer. Thus, these employees were unaccustomed to the work practices needed to collaborate with employees in non-developer roles. With SquareOne's development culture rooted in open source traditions, the cultural practices that implicitly disempowered non-developer contributors were retained as core components of SquareOne's development culture.

In that light, it is unsurprising that Ruth could not have single-handedly attained developer agreement for her goals, since her cultural background and needs as a principal technical writer was incompatible with the cultural heritage of SquareOne's developer community. In the absence of a conscious commitment by SquareOne's management to affect a cultural shift to better incorporate Ruth's needs, this culture gap was irreconcilable. Correspondingly, with this culture gap in place, a communal agreement that included Ruth remained unlikely.

Power & Knowledge Legitimation

Ruth's experiences — and her parting blog entry — depict a sense of curtailed power to influence her work environment. Using Grossberg's definition (1987, p. 95), we argue that Ruth was culturally denied the opportunity to “enable a particular practice or statement to exist in a specific context.”

This denial of power was expressed through Ruth's exclusion from community discussions, and a lack of support for Ruth's goals of creating of high-quality end-user

and developer help. By considering the means through which Ruth was denied power, we can now begin to construct a definition of power within SquareOne's development organization as the ability to influence:

1. The shared knowledge-making practices of the SquareOne development organization
2. The actual software package generated by the SquareOne development organization

This definition is not meant to constitute a comprehensive definition of power, as it omits crucial characteristics of power such as individual autonomy (Clark, 2007, p. 168). Rather, this definition is a simplification to focus and bound our scope of analysis. With this tangible definition of power within SquareOne, we may now also consider the processes that enabled or obstructed Ruth's access to power.

A core tenet of open source development is the concept of knowledge legitimation through open discourse and debate. In other words, the best software development decisions are held to be generated through intense and often fierce debate among a community of technically smart people. In an ideal narrative of this meritocratic model, all individuals are equally empowered to contribute to the debate, and the collective community is capable of objectively assessing the best decision. This model of knowledge legitimation valorized in open source often dominated decision-making meetings and mailing list discussions at SquareOne.

However, after stripping away this model's veneer of idealism and inclusiveness, these conversations nonetheless constituted "culturally contextualized contests for

dominance and power” (Longo, 1998, p. 65). In meetings, Ruth felt herself to be frequently interrupted and talked over by developers. With her input curtailed at face-to-face meetings, Ruth was primarily limited to mailing lists as a means of communication, where her e-mails often went unanswered. Thus, Ruth’s power was stripped through tacit exclusion from communal knowledge-making activities.

By being removed from these communal knowledge-making processes — and through the lack of developer support previously described — Ruth was also excluded from substantively influencing the development of SquareOne’s software.

Subbiah’s model of social constructionism (1997) does not consider the scenario of a unilaterally excluded group member. To understand this exclusion, we must continue our application of cultural studies, and specifically, we introduce the concept of articulation.

Strength of Articulation

Why did Ruth face such overpowering resistance and exclusion?

Ruth’s difficulties in becoming an influential non-developer participant, in fact, were not unique within SquareOne; at time of writing, four of the five other full-time employees hired for SquareOne’s community and user advocacy have left the company. In informal conversations, all of these employees cited an inability to exact organizational influence as the primary motive of their departure, and most felt excluded from the company’s core decision-making conversations.

At this point, we open the question of why a culture that accelerated the departure of the majority of non-technical engineering staff was not mercilessly rooted out of this organization's DNA. Under cultural studies, we may consider an organization to be a *network of connections* between subjects, social practices, ideologies, or social groups (Slack, Miller & Doak, 1993, p. 26). These connections — commonly called *articulations* — are held together with varying degrees of resilience, creating an environment in which certain possibilities are empowered, and others are disempowered.

Consider the example of the core group of SquareOne developers and their late-night hacking sessions. These sessions empowered the development team by providing their social group with an ongoing shared social practice, incorporating male bonding rituals such as consuming alcoholic beverages and the communal discharging of explosives on the office's front porch (as attended by the author).

However, as SquareOne grew, this same practice disempowered the company's growing non-developer employee population by obstructing their access to key design discussions made during these midnight sessions. When the resulting disempowerment was raised as a concern, these sessions did not cease. Instead, ideological objections were raised, expressing that these sessions embodied the developers' conception of a healthy start-up culture.

In other words, the network of articulations underlying the shared late-night hacking sessions was deeply intertwined throughout the company's social practices and ideologies. Because of the tenacity (resilience) of these articulations, Ruth could not

restructure her organizational surroundings in a fashion that would empower her creation of high-quality instructional design.

Conclusion

We have considered Ruth's experience through a hybrid framework that applies cultural theory to elaborate upon the social constructivist process of community agreement. In doing so, we are able to better explore the root causes that barred Ruth from obtaining agreement, and thus, obtaining access to the power to influence SquareOne's organization and product.

Whereas social constructivism enables us to consider the perturbations in the agreement and knowledge-making processes that were triggered by Ruth's employment at SquareOne, it does not in itself provide an adequate mechanism for understanding or interpreting the process.

By incorporating cultural studies as a tool for studying the agreement and knowledge-making processes, we are able to also examine the cultural and power considerations at play in these processes. In doing so, we gain a combined theoretical perspective that offers insights into the means by which the cultural backgrounds of a community affect its communal agreement process.

This perspective may also offer value to future researchers by providing a method of culturally investigating a social constructionist agreement process. However, a more complete picture of existing scholarship is needed in order to precisely situate the potential role of this combined theoretical perspective.

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