FEATURES

Technical Communication Pioneer: A Conversation with Ginny Redish

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By Hillary Hart | *Fellow*

Ginny Redish is a seminal figure in the development of technical communication as a mature, if ever-changing, field of endeavor. She pioneered document design, usability as a design technique, and much more. From her leadership of the Document Design Center in Washington, DC, beginning in the late 1970s, to her projects championing "plain language," to her foundational work on user-experience research and design, Ginny has been a generous thought-leader. She has shared her work and her research results with academic and industry practitioners through seminars, training, consultation, and decades-long participation in professional societies such as STC. Her latest book, *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works* (2d ed., 2012) has been described by Jared Spool as "the most important book on the shelves of anyone who creates websites that have words on them."

I'm sure I first met Ginny at one of the many STC conferences at which she presented—through the years, she has been a mentor and friend, always encouraging and celebrating my interest in bringing the work and culture of academia closer to the work of industry and government practitioners. Ginny sees herself as part of a community and a continuum within technical communication. One of the things you will notice in this interview is the generosity with which she mentions and praises the work of others.

Hillary Hart: I'm on the line with Ginny Redish, one of the founders of the field of usability, which is now usually called "user experience." Ginny, of course, has been a thought-leader in many areas of technical communication, this multifaceted field that we are in. And we're going to hear today some of these thoughts. Ginny, it's great to see you.

Ginny Redish: It's great to see you, Hillary. Thank you for asking me to do this.

Hillary: Well, thank you for doing it. I'm so pleased, really, to be able to talk with you about your life and career in technical communication. We've actually known each other for some years. And at some point, I discovered that we both had (different) degrees from Bryn Mawr College, and you did your bachelor's work in Russian!

Would you talk about your early formal schooling and how it set up or didn't set you up for a career in technical communication/usability?

Ginny: Well, I think it's very interesting because many people of my generation came into technical communication and then into usability fairly late because we didn't even know about it as a potential career. As an undergraduate, I didn't know that that was a possible job. I was very interested in language. I've always been fascinated by language, and I was interested in Russian for two reasons: one, I really wanted to read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the original, which I think is what makes many English majors into English majors because they want to get into that literature. But also for the young people who may not remember, this was the 1960s and Russian was the language that did have potential jobs. I think today it would probably be Chinese you would study. So it was something that I thought of having a job in, although in fact that isn't what actually happened. But it was fascinating to do.

Hillary: So, what you are saying brings up that metaphor a lot of technical communicators are familiar with: the multiple paths that somehow converge in a career in technical communication. So let's keep following the paths in your career. Would you talk about other early experiences in your professional life and how they led, or didn't quite lead, to the American Institutes for Research in Washington, DC, in the late 1970s?

Ginny: So, after my undergraduate degree, I got to spend a year in Europe, which was really great. I had a Fulbright to study Russian in the Netherlands, which was a much nicer place to do it than Moscow was at the time. Again, in the 1960s.

And then I went to graduate school in linguistics. My love of languages and what I did as a graduate student have nothing to do with my career, except for the fact that it was really about analyzing and synthesizing data—which is what we do all the time—and then communicating it clearly. I discovered that I happened to be a good plain language writer and I ended up in Washington D.C. because I married a fellow graduate student, actually an MIT student—I was at Harvard, he was at MIT. Cambridge people think that's a mixed marriage.

Hillary: [laughter] I know.

Ginny: He finished a year before I did and got a job at the University of Maryland. I needed a career when I finished graduate school; and, in Washington, DC, there are a lot of think tanks, like the American Institutes for Research. I was actually hired there—after I stayed home with a couple of babies for several years—as a research associate to work on language policy.

Then, in 1977, Jimmy Carter (and, again, this may be ancient history for some of our young technical communicators…) put forth an executive order. Carter was very interested in having people be able to participate in government. He believed that government should be transparent, very much like the Clinton administration and the Obama administration. The order said that everything coming out of the government should be in clear writing. And I guess I was at the right place at the right time. AIR—the American Institutes for Research—which is a not-for-profit think tank very interested in social issues, decided that it was appropriate for us to bid on a project in which the government wanted someone to worry about why government documents are so difficult for people. It was the beginning of another round of the plain language movement. I still didn't know about technical communication, but I knew about clear writing. We got the project, with Carnegie Mellon University and a private plain language firm in New York, Siegel and Gale. And we set about answering that question: why are government documents so difficult for people and what can be done about them?

We did that for three years. We made a lot of progress at the time. And then the government changed in the early 1980s, but it was also the moment of the personal computer, right? Remember? The personal computer. And that's when I discovered technical communication and STC.

Hillary: The story of your founding the Document Design Center in DC within AIR is really a compelling piece of technical communication history, along with the subsequent breakthroughs and projects that you managed. Would you talk more about those?

Ginny: The project I mentioned that I got to lead in the late '70s and early '80s was called the Document Design Project, funded by the Department of Education. And that was an interesting group because there were linguists; there were reading specialists; there were psychologists involved in it. They wanted a team with linguists and writing specialists and reading specialists and psychologists, and that's the team we put together. That team came from AIR and the group at Carnegie Mellon University, including Karen Schriver, who was then a graduate student—now another active STC Fellow, from Pittsburgh—and Professor John Richard Hayes, who was studying writing at the time. I also hired English majors, English PhDs, anthropologists, philosophy majors, and psychologists to be part of this team.

I think one of the reasons that we were the successful bidders on this project was that we promised that we wouldn't just do the three years of the government funding. We would make it into an ongoing center. And that's what we named the Document Design Center. We got to do research. We got to disseminate research. We wrote three books. One is called *Guidelines for Document Designers*, which I think has spread quite widely.

Hillary: Yes.

Ginny: Karen Schriver and other people at Carnegie Mellon started a comparable center. They called it the Communication Design Center. I think the two centers together had a big influence on the plain language movement.

Hillary: Yes, indeed. Big, big, impact. I'm curious about your subsequent projects because these are reforms that have stuck, you know? And I wonder which success is sort of your fondest.

Ginny: Well, I think two. There's the work that came into STC in the early '80s. Again, young people probably don't remember what computer documentation looked like in the '60s and '70s when it was very much system oriented. You had to know what commands you needed to look up to know how to use a program.

Documentation wasn't in user language, it was in system language. It was organized in system terminology, not in users' words and what users want to do. Then in the early '80s, when the personal computer came out, the computer companies became much more interested in communicating not only with system administrators in the back room, but with ordinary people. And we were among the first to create user-oriented, task-oriented documentation.

So instead of having to know the word "grep" and look up how to command the computer to "grep," the manuals we wrote said "printing your file," which is what the command "grep" in UNIX, actually, I believe, does. […] It was that sort of change that we made. And in our earliest example of a computer manual for IBM, we created icons and put them on the tabs in the paper manual. It was user oriented. We took our manuals to usability testing and were humiliated with some of the things we had done that confused people, but we learned the technique of actually trying it out before it got released.

Hillary: What a concept.

Ginny: Yes, yes. And today that's a fairly common thing to do, and people realize that people don't actually read these manuals from cover to cover, they jump into them. In fact, today, the

manual probably is online and you're just searching for a little piece of it. So I think one of our successes that I'm very proud of is our contribution to what you might call modern technical documentation. Other people were doing the same things at the same time. JoAnn Hackos, another former—like yourself—former President of STC, and her group out in Denver were doing similar work. And we were doing research of the sort that Jack Carroll, who is now a professor at Penn State, but who was at IBM at the time, was doing: research on how people actually use manuals. So that's another contribution, I think … to say you can't just take information and write it, you have to figure out what people do, and make things that work for them.

On the government side, I think the success I'm most proud of is being part of what happened in Washington State, which has now spread to many other states.

Hillary: Tell us about that.

Ginny: As a physics professor, my husband has a sabbatical every seven years. In the early '90s, he took his sabbatical at the University of Washington, where there is a wonderful technical communication group that included Judy Ramey, who, again, is an STC Fellow, now retired from the university. I got to work with Judy that year. I also got invited by an STC member who worked for the state government to address a group of government writers who had a monthly brown-bag lunch meeting with a speaker. I talked about what plain language in government would look like. And from there, lots of wonderful things have happened.

Hillary: Such as, the state government's adoption of plain language for regulations and policy statements. I just want to say, for those of you who don't know, a lot of Ginny's knowledge about and efforts with plain language ended up in articles and research behind the compilation of guidelines at *usability.gov*. I think a lot of people don't know about this site. I looked at it the other day, and it's still fabulously useful and well designed. So for those of you who may not know about usability.gov, check it out.

Ginny, let me just switch gears a bit here. You and I have both talked on many occasions about the apparent disjunction between academic researchers and technical communication practitioners. For many reasons, academics seem to find it hard to do and publish, in your words, "ecological research that asks the questions practitioners actually have." Could you talk more about how a more fruitful academe-industry relationship and research program could work?

Ginny: You know I think that is changing slightly over the last few years, Hillary. I think there

have always been a few people: yourself, Judy Ramey, and other folks at the University of Washington who have seen the need to do more ecological research. I think there are more practitioner-academic collaborations happening, in which there is a real project. A lot of technical communication classes involve people doing actual project work—having a real experience—and writing it up. Other classes are doing more of that. I think all through academia there's more interest in preparing people for work.

Hillary: We call that now "experiential learning."

Ginny: "Experiential learning"—that's a great term. And that is what I mean. So I'm hopeful that more and more of that will happen.

Hillary: In your latest book, *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, you suggest thinking of content as "conversation." For anybody not familiar with the book, can you talk about what you mean by that?

Ginny: Yes. When I do workshops, I always start with having people think about when they recently went to a typical website (not games or entertainment or even news sites, but a more typical website). When you think about why you went, what you were trying to find out, you realize that you went because you had a question in mind. You went because you wanted to know a particular something. And that question is a conversation—it's the start of a conversation. You want the website to act as a conversational partner to talk back to you. And then you want to ask the next question and have the website talk back to you again. I find it very interesting to think about websites that way. Many people are now going to websites entirely on their phones. Right? So we have a device that was meant to be for the kind of conversation you and I are having, although we're having it over a computer and not in between two telephones.

Hillary: But it's synchronous.

Ginny: It's synchronous. It is a conversation. And yet they're using that device not to talk, but to have a written conversation. On a website, the conversation is not synchronous. It's asynchronous. It's not in exactly the same time, but it still is a conversation. And, therefore, web content works best when it's written as if it were a conversation, with personal pronouns, with short sentences, with active voice, with thinking about the person you are having that conversation with, what they want to know, and what information they need. So "conversation" works very well as a metaphor.

Hillary: In 2013, you received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the User Experience Professionals Association. Congratulations.

Ginny: Thank you.

Hillary: Of course, you're still an active consultant and trainer. At this stage in your career, how do you choose the projects that you will work on?

Ginny: Well, I have the luxury of choosing at this stage. I've been my own little consulting company for the last 20 some years, and I've done a variety of projects, a lot of them in usability or usability testing, that is, helping people get people to try out what they are developing or to do early research. Given the fact that I can pick and choose, I think it's interesting that I've come back to my love of technical communication. The projects I'm mostly doing now are helping people write plain language web content. And I really enjoy being a technical writer.

Hillary: Well, I gotta ask the big "where are we headed" question. As a thought-leader, Ginny, where do you think the technical communication field is headed? How can practitioners and academics prepare themselves?

Ginny: The first thing to say from my long career and your somewhat shorter but also active career is that we have to always be in learning mode. We don't know what the next device will be. We don't know what the next technology will be. But we do know that when it comes out, we will have to learn it well enough to be able to explain it to people and help them use it. And so being open minded and always out there finding out how people are actually living their life and doing things I think is going to be even more critical.

If I can say anything to you folks in the university, it's to get out and see the world and make sure that at least some of the classes that your students take help them get out and see the world.

Where are we heading? I think the other place that we've been heading for the last couple of decades is away from big, honking paper. And that's something that I think a number of the people in STC had to work their way into: to realize that it is all online now and that it's all in small chunks now. We know nobody ever really read the great big clunky manual cover to cover. So we tried to write paper books in which people could jump in and get what they needed and jump back out again. And now all that stuff is online and it's got to be in small pieces. We have to break up great piles of information into structured pieces that can then be combined and recombined and put out in any medium.

You'll notice I didn't talk about tools. I know that a lot of technical communicators focus on tools or are forced to focus on tools, because jobs often say you need to know this tool or the other. But it isn't about the tools. The tools will change. It's about understanding users and what makes good writing. And also this new idea—well, new as in the last few decades—that it's about chunks of information. It's not about long-winded paper.

Hillary: Well, Ginny, this has been such a pleasure. A great pleasure for me.

Ginny: Thank you very much for doing this, and I really appreciate STC doing this series of interviews. I look forward to listening to and reading those with other people, and I hope that this interests people not only because of the history that perhaps I bring by having been in the field for so long, but thinking about now and the future.

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