Content as Conversation

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IPCC
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Communication = Conversation

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For this talk, I am not including

- Skype and other voice over internet protocol (VOIP) programs
- instant messaging (IM) or chat
- computer talking (building artificial intelligence into computers)
an asynchronous
Writing as conversation

Mmmm… I wonder what that means.
Every use of every web site is a conversation started by the site visitor

Lost. No problem. Use the computer!

Flickr cc photo by Bradleyolin

theme = content as conversation
Influence 1: Caroline Jarrett's 3-layer model of forms

- Relationship
- Conversation
- Appearance

Jarrett and Gaffney
*Forms that Work: Designing Web Forms for Usability*
Elsevier, 2008

http://formsthatwork.com
Influence 2: Coney and Steehouder
Role playing on the web

Coney and Steehouder
Role Playing on the Web: Guidelines for Designing and Evaluating
Personas Online
Technical Communication, 47, 3, 2000

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Content as Conversation
Slide 7
Technical communicators have been writing asynchronous conversations for a long time.

Sometimes explicitly

![Microsoft Excel dialog box]
Sometimes explicitly
Sometimes explicitly
Sometimes explicitly
Not so explicit, but can you hear the conversation?

What’s in the box?

You should have received all the following items in the box:

**Hardware**
- Treo 680
- AT&T Wireless SIM card (not included with all models; preinstalled in Treo 680 on some models; see Inserting the SIM card and battery for details)

**Documentation and software**
- Getting Started Guide
- Quickstart Guide
- Palm Software Installation CD, which includes the following:
  - Palm® Desktop software
  - Bonus software for your Treo 680
  - Your Palm Treo 680 Smart Device User Guide (this guide)
  - Palm warranty

**TIP** Missing something? Need help? Contact AT&T Wireless customer service: 1-866-246-4852 or call 611 from your mobile phone.

**KEY TERM** SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) card
The smartcard that you insert into your Treo 680 and that identifies you to the mobile network. It contains your mobile account information, such as your phone number and the services to which you subscribe. Phone book entries and SMS messages can also be stored on the SIM card.

- Rechargeable battery
- AC charger
- USB sync cable
- Headset

- Screen protector; apply one to eliminate glare and guard against dust and scratches
Every task-oriented procedure we write is a conversation.

 can also assign a photo and ringtone ID to that contact, so you know when they call you.

**Adding a contact**

1. Press **Phone**.
2. Select the **Contacts** tab.
3. Press **Menu**.
4. Select **New Contact** from the **Record** menu.
5. Use the **5-way** to move between fields as you enter info.

6. Do any of the following:
   - **Add a caller ID photo**: Select the Picture box. (See **Assigning a caller ID photo** for more info.)
   - **Add a caller ID ringtone**: Select the Ringtone pick list. (See **Assigning a caller ID ringtone** for more info.)
   - **Place the entry in a category or mark it private**: Select Details. (See **Working with private entries** for more info.)
   - **Add a note to an entry**: Select **Note**.
   - **Display additional fields for this contact**: Select **Plus**.

7. After you enter all the information, select **Done**.

**TIP** Import contacts from your SIM card quickly and easily. In the Contacts list, press **Menu** and then select **Import from SIM** from the Record menu.

**Viewing or changing contact information**

1. Press **Phone**.
2. Select the **Contacts** tab.
Well-written help is a conversation.

If you want to..., do.....
Can you hear the conversation in this form even if the form has labels, not questions, by the fields?
Asynchronous conversation is *the* contribution of professional technical communicators.

Issuance of a TOP command results in a line zero condition.

To go to the beginning of your file, type TOP and press Enter.
Influence 3: Going back even further – linguistic research on pragmatics

- Pragmatics = language in use

- Every utterance in natural spoken language has
  - syntax = its structure (grammar)
  - semantics = the meaning (words)
  - pragmatics = the context

- The context may cause the utterance to have a meaning beyond the literal meaning of the words.
Is it cold in here?
H. P. (Paul) Grice (1913 – 1988)
- philosopher of language
- Oxford → Berkeley
- studied conversation
- introduced the modern field of pragmatics (1960s)

Grice's maxims are assumptions we have about conversation. They are expectations we all have as speakers and listeners in a face-to-face conversation.
Quality (truth)

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
Quantity (information)

- Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
Relevance

- Be relevant.
Manner (clarity)

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief.
- Be orderly.
Good conversation?
(Opening of conversation)

The car is almost out of petrol.

© iStockPhoto

Continue to next slide ➔
Good conversation? (Response)

There's a petrol station around the corner.
Good conversation?

To exit the program, type Quit and press Enter.

Be sure to save your files before you do that.
Some implications of content as conversation

We must know and focus on our readers.

- Think about how readers will interpret what you write.
- Realize that words trigger associations.
- Write with context first. (Given - New)
- Give and take turns.
Think about how readers will interpret what you write

BA (Honours) **Philosophy and Psychological Studies** Code: B43
You need: **360 points**
Level: **Undergraduate**

Example courtesy of Caroline Jarrett and Whitney Quesenbery
Realize that words trigger associations

Mailing Address Furnished By Licensee

What address must I put on my application?
Write with context first. (Given - New)

Approved fumigation with methyl bromide at normal atmospheric pressure, in accordance with the following procedure, upon arrival at the port of entry, is hereby prescribed as a condition of importation for shipments of yams from foreign countries.

How would you say this information in a conversation?

Try it!
Did you say something like this?

If you are importing yams, [someone] must fumigate them when they arrive at the port of entry.

To fumigate yams, [someone] must use this procedure:

Give and take turns

Dense text = too long a turn, "hogging the conversation"

Clear, meaningful, useful headings are the reader's turns in the conversation.

Flickr cc photo by Polandeze
Why is this not a good conversation?

From Jarrett and Gaffney
*Forms that Work: Designing Web Forms for Usability*
Elsevier, 2008, chapter 6
Other areas of linguistics grew out of Grice's pragmatics

- speech act theory
- conversational analysis
- sociolinguistics
- cognitive linguistics
Present – and future?
2 Thoughts on “Read a chapter from the book”

From Sam:

I thought this was a great book and was able to apply a few of the principles to our website during a recent update. We added informative link names, broke information into bite-size chunks, made pages friendlier to scanning, not reading.

We’re pleased with the result.

From Leslie:

I am buying your book tonight, Ginny. Seeing the sample chapters convinced me that I must have it.

I have an old-fashioned manual that I have to convert to an up-to-date Help system for a web service. I think your book will provide exactly the kind of guidance I need to plan the rearchitecture and conversion.
The future of information for students

Example of the multi-channel, highly-interactive, non-textbook-based, largely web-based course materials with group work, courtesy of Edward (Joe) Redish, Professor of Physics, University of Maryland, USA.
The future of information for product users

Training manuals

User guides

Help topics

?
Is computer-human interaction (CHI) still what it's all about?

- We don't talk about telephone-human interaction for synchronous conversation.

**Asynchronous**

^ conversation is simply human – human interaction through the computer.

Inspired by what Dana Chisnell told me she heard at a panel at ACM CHI 2008.
Think "conversation."
Write conversations.
Facilitate conversations.

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Morgan Kaufmann / Elsevier, 2007