

# The Role of the Technical Communicator in the Corporate eLearning Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Technical communicators bring myriad skills to professional roles, including textual and visual content creation, content organization, content strategy, technology proficiency, and user analysis. These skills are well-matched for roles in elearning, strategizing and creating instructional content for online consumption. Through literature review, informational interviews, and job posts analysis, the correlation between a technical communicator's skills and the skills needed to be successful in elearning becomes clear. This research elucidates the opportunities for technical communicators in the corporate elearning industry and offers an introductory guide into exploring a career in the industry.

## KEYWORDS

elearning, technical communications, online learning, professional skills, instructional design, professional roles

## Introduction

eLearning is a new industry that has grown up with the internet. As technology continues to develop and expand, online learning becomes more powerful and popular. One market survey forecasts that the elearning market worldwide will reach \$238 billion by 2024, with a huge boost in corporate online learning (*E-Learning Market*, 2019). Spanning in-depth training courses with quizzes to quick 2-minute skill-building videos, elearning is used for basic employee training as well as end-user consumer support, and new uses for corporate elearning continue to appear.

All of this material requires design, development, and content management. What types of professionals are supporting this industry and its growth? Any elearning project of course has its project manager, as well as a programmer, and with video pieces there will often be videographers, actors, voice actors, and editors (Vallee, 2017). But the bulk of the strategy, content creation, and overall design falls to a unique group of individuals who carry a wide array of titles: instructional designer, curriculum coordinator, elearning specialist, educational technologist, and even the generic title of content developer (Sun et al., 2018, p. 82). These titles are just as new and ever-changing as the industry, and who exactly fills these roles is under constant study.

Through review of role descriptions, job tasks, and core competencies related to elearning professionals, it would appear that technical communicators are well-matched and properly

equipped to find quality career opportunities within elearning. However, technical communicators are not mentioned in other studies about elearning roles, perhaps because of a lack of awareness of the discipline in the professional world. This paper will provide an introductory guide for technical communicators on the industry, outlining key skills needed, types of elearning to explore, tools to learn, and future trends to be aware of.

This research specifically looks at corporate elearning: fully online learning meant for adults - professional or consumer - and is generally not provided through an educational institution. (For simplification, I will be using just “elearning” throughout this study.)

## Rationale

Traditionally, a technical *writer* is someone who creates documentation for technical processes. The term technical *communicator* greatly expands the initial discipline. In the University of Minnesota’s scientific and technical communication program, there is a marked shift to go beyond traditional technical writing: to think about the available technological tools and best uses; about how content - written and other media - needs to be organized; and about the user’s needs and expectations, whatever the communication method. It’s an exciting discipline, but the broad exploration in study also opens up broad career opportunities; it is not so simple as studying civil engineering and then becoming a licensed civil engineer, for example.

eLearning is an industry that relies heavily on communicating through technology. Professionals need to assess audience needs and the concepts to be communicated, strategize content for online use, develop and program that content using technological tools, and organize the content through course plans and program platforms such as learning management systems (LMS). Thus elearning conceptually sounds like a good career option for a technical communicator; however, there is not much material available that explores this apparent opportunity. Other disciplines are making the connection between themselves and elearning, though, notably information systems/information technology (Mills & Fadel, 2012; Williams, 2009).

One reason the connection between technical communication and elearning has yet to be explored might be that technical communicators still spend a significant amount of time just trying to define themselves and their core competencies (Carliner, 2012). The role of technical communicator was only entered in the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Outlook Handbook in 2011, and its listed definition is arguably lacking (Henning & Bemer, 2016). In the meantime, those that consider themselves technical communicators fill an ever-widening swath of job roles. In the 1990’s, a report from the Society of Technical Communication identified several hundred unique job titles; the work of compiling such a list of titles now seems unreasonable.

The larger problem is that because technical communication labors to define itself, “students interested in technical communication careers still struggle with identifying opportunities” (Bloch, 2011, p. 308). Additionally, professionals may struggle to identify career options when there is no specific set of roles or titles to search or aim for. If someone doesn’t know about the opportunities

for technical communicators within elearning, they can't begin to pursue additional skills to support their growth into the industry and take the necessary steps to prepare themselves.

eLearning as an industry faces issues when it comes to definitions, as well. As a relatively new field, elearning roles and skills continue to evolve. Job titles, skills, and tasks are not standard between organizations, and thus the field is under constant study as researchers try to define what they see happening in the professional world. The elearning industry may struggle to obtain qualified individuals with the right skills when talent can't identify the roles they should be filling. Technical communicators might be the right fits for certain roles, but if the job title isn't clear, even if the professional wants to enter the elearning industry they won't be able to find the job postings relevant to them.

Research is thus needed to outline the core skills that technical communicators can bring to elearning and conversely what skills are needed for elearning. Through interviews with current elearning professionals and reviewing current job postings, we can begin to develop a guide for technical communicators to educate them on the opportunities.

## Literature Review

Before digging into this research focus, I searched for scholarly work already completed on the topic. I searched under a variety of descriptors for both aspects - "technical writing and online learning," "technical communicators in elearning," etc. - and did not come up with relevant results. However, work from other disciplines outlining the connection between themselves and elearning did appear.

Mills and Fadel (2012) make the case that elearning should be a provided career track within information systems (IS) graduate programs. They saw that elearning was a rapidly growing industry that needed experts, and they argue that it is a huge opportunity that IS majors could step into with the right additional learning added to their program. Quoting Williams (2009, para. 14), they show that IS professionals already have some of the needed skills to enter elearning, "Companies usually prefer that candidates have additional competencies that technical professionals may already have, such as expertise in computer networking, learning management systems (LMS), e-learning and Web site development." IS graduates are currently equipped with knowledge of business foundations, information technology, and tool expertise, three of five critical skills outlined in cited previous studies. By enhancing an IS program with instructional design and project management - the other two critical skills identified - they believe a student will be evenly or better equipped than a human resources or instructional technology graduate to fill elearning roles. On the same track, Williams encourages IT professionals to take some instructional design courses and make the move to elearning.

While no academic scholarship was apparent on this topic, it should be noted that the University of Limerick recently launched [a graduate program in technical communication and elearning](#).

Additionally, the Society for Technical Communication has a special interest group for [instructional design and learning](#).

Sun et al. (2018) explored key competencies expected on the job market of elearning specialists. To do this, they scraped all elearning roles posted to the top 20 global universities and top 20 companies to compile a list of 177 job postings and then boiled them down to 20 main job description terms. Twenty terms is a lot for a professional interested in the industry to search for to find a job! Titles included the generic “content developer” as well as the wordy “infrastructure services technical trainer.”

Looking specifically at elearning roles in higher education in Australia, Mitchell et al. (2017) nicely sum up the issue for these roles that cross disciplines and lack clearly understood titles:

Academic developers, instructional designers and educational technologists are all examples of these skilled individuals typically working in ‘third space’ that crosses complex boundaries - between the pedagogical and technological, and the academic and professional. However, role titles and descriptions of duties are often unclear at best, with a lack of consistent terminology used across institutions and in the literature. This can lead to confusion and tensions when working with multiple institutional stakeholders who are uncertain about the abilities and knowledge of people in these roles. (p. 147)

As the professional world struggles to land on consistent naming conventions for job postings in technical communications as well as elearning, academics have thoroughly investigated the key required skills and core competencies that define both disciplines. Consensus is not clear here, either, as researchers continue to create their own lists and endlessly categorize skills under different headings. Following are one selected example of core competencies for each discipline. Sun et al. (2018) created a summarized and updated list of elearning competencies pulled from previous studies and a review of current job postings, and Henschel and Meloncon (2014) succinctly present a thorough summarization of previous competency studies for technical communication.

The Society for Technical Communication stated that “[t]here is no common profession that all technical communicators share. What they do share is a common set of skills that defines the discipline of technical communication” (STC, 2013, p. 4, as cited in Henning & Bemer, 2016). What exactly those skills are has been researched often over the years and each researcher presents a slightly different list. Henschel and Meloncon (2014) reviewed numerous previous reports and provide a comprehensive visual showing their summarized five conceptual skills (center circle) and the associated practical skills (outer corner boxes).

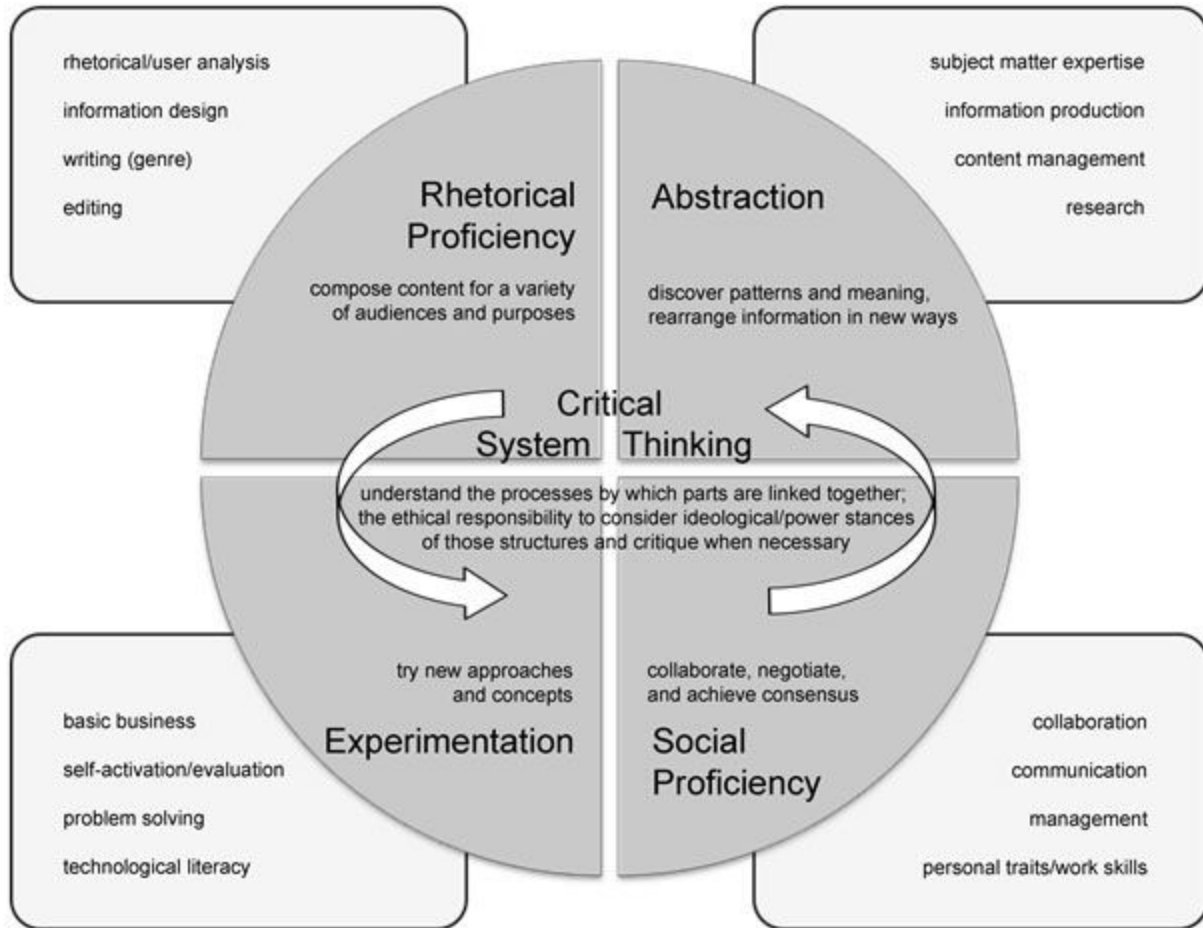


Figure 1. Henschel and Melancon’s “Explanatory Matrix: conceptual and practical skills aligned”

Because of the fast pace at which evolving technology changes web 2.0 disciplines such as elearning, Sun et al. (2018) not only created a summary of competencies for elearning based on previous studies, but they adjusted the list to reflect current trends they saw in job postings. They identified these top 10 (ranked) competencies for elearning:

<b>1. Content management</b>	Determining learning goals and strategies, researching and developing learning content that is easily understood by the intended audience.
<b>2. Collaboration skills</b>	Working effectively with team members, subject matter experts (SMEs), and stakeholders.
<b>3. Website knowledge</b>	Understanding learning management systems (LMS)
<b>4. Project management</b>	Efficiently managing time, plans, and decisions.

<b>5. Andragogy</b>	Understanding adult learning theories and designing content for the adult user's needs and expectations.
<b>6. Interpersonal communication skills</b>	Interpersonal communication skills: dealing with cross-functional goals and getting project buy-in, navigating cultural differences and diverse learning backgrounds.
<b>7. Pedagogy</b>	Understanding and utilizing instructional design methods and processes.
<b>8. Digital technology tools</b>	Mastering content creation and editing tools.
<b>9. Assessment strategies</b>	Evaluating learner outcomes, success of program, and emerging learning technologies.
<b>10. Oral and written communication skills</b>	Clearly communicating throughout content creation, collaboration, and curriculum design.

Below, I have mapped these skills to Henschel and Meloncon's visual.

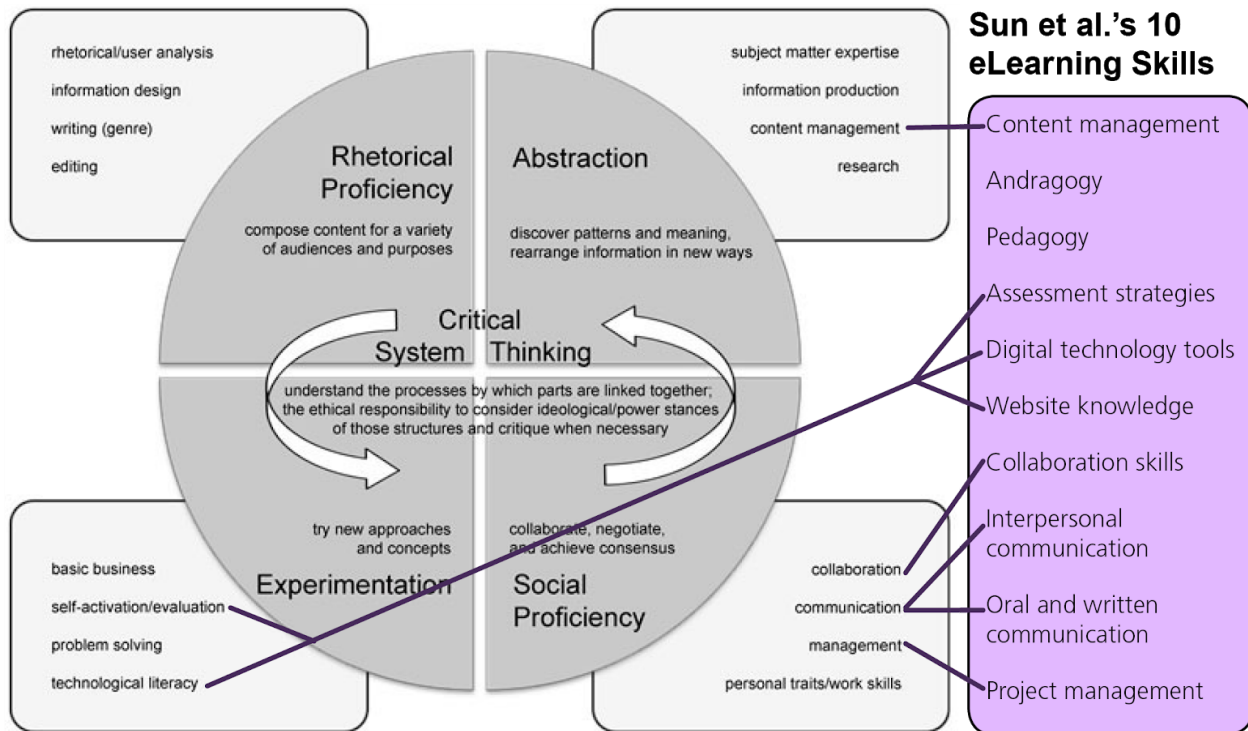


Figure 2. Henschel and Melancon's "Explanatory Matrix" with Sun et al.'s 10 elearning competencies (re-ordered for clarity)



The only skills unlinked are andragogy and pedagogy. Notably, this is the same category of missing skills identified in IS/IT professionals by Mills and Fadel (2012) and Williams (2009). Thus, though no previous research to this study analyzed the overlap between technical communications and elearning, the same argument made for IS professionals can be applied to technical communicators. Further, technical communicators bring indirect skills to andragogy through audience analysis and information design (identified in the upper left box, as part of rhetorical proficiency). Technical communicators think about the user and their needs and goals, and we create and design our content to best facilitate those. Arguably, technical communicators could quickly adapt to the additional skills needed through supplemental coursework, personal reading and research, or on-the-job experience.

## Methods

To get a current view into the elearning industry in the Twin Cities, I conducted open-ended style interviews with six individuals employed in elearning. Two interviewees work in elearning agencies, two support internal learning and development within larger corporations, and two provide external elearning materials that support their company's product. I approached each interview with the same set of questions as a base. (These questions can be reviewed at the end of this study.) I asked additional questions based on each interviewee's responses to dig deeper into topics as needed. With a limited timeline for my research, six interviews was all that was possible, however trends emerged even through this small dataset.

In addition, I reviewed 20 live job postings for elearning roles in the Twin Cities metro area. I created a list of the job titles I was able to discover, and analyzed job task descriptions to identify what skills the hiring company expected applicants to have. While job postings might present an idealized version than what a role actually turns out to be, technical communicators still need to know which keywords to include in their resumes to be competitive when applying for roles.

## Results

### Job Posts

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly limited the number of current job postings in the Twin Cities for analysis at the time of my research. The dataset is too small to provide adequate quantitative analysis, however certain trends are evident. When looking at the required qualifications sections - beyond having experience with certain creation and content management tools - the skills that are most often listed include:

<b>Instructional design</b>	Knowledge of adult learning theories/practices/models (ADDIE, SAM, others); creating instructional content employees, customers or both; developing course plans
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<b>Interpersonal skills</b>	Interacting professionally with all levels of the business, collaborating with SMEs, and building consensus, consulting
<b>Project/time management</b>	Keeping track of tasks for multiple projects, working independently, and being self-motivated
<b>Writing</b>	This skill is called out specifically about half of the time (versus assumed as part of content development.) Depending on the role, writing means creating copy, scripts, or documentation; storyboarding; writing modular content
<b>Quick learner</b>	Ability to learn aspects of the business quickly, aptitude for learning new software applications
<b>Assessment/ analytics</b>	Occasionally mentioned, in order to report on LMS usage and course completions, as well as to assess successful learning/user assessment of knowledge
<b>Visual design</b>	Called out specifically in about half of the postings. A few mentioned video production skills, one required intermediate knowledge of photo editing

Job posts frequently cited knowledge of an instructional design model as required, usually ADDIE, though some posts were agnostic and simply wanted applicants to know and utilize one. These models, or design frameworks, are basic processes that designers or teams can follow to develop educational content. The model ADDIE stands for Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate. A newer framework that appeared in some job posts is SAM. SAM stands for Successive Approximation Model and it was developed by St. Paul, Minnesota-based Allen Interactions. SAM is a cyclical process that moves faster in some ways. A small version of SAM includes Analysis, Design, and Development, but a designer or team might run through these steps multiple times as needed, whereas ADDIE is generally a one-way process through each step.

In general, the job posts surveyed most often describe the skills Sun et al. (2018) identified. The concept of “adult learning theory” (andragogy) was mentioned in a few job posts, though most, if they referred to audience, stated “clients” or “users at all business levels.” All 10 skills of Sun et al.’s list were evident in the job posts, corroborating their findings.

### Interviews

With a limited timeline for my research, six interviews was all that was possible, however again, trends emerged even through this small dataset. The skills and characteristics that came up repeatedly in interviews include interpersonal communication/negotiation, empathy/understanding of users and their needs, and technology curiosity. Project management, visual design, and strategy were mentioned, and strong written communication was of course mentioned by all.



## Interpersonal Communication

The concept of interpersonal communication ranked high by interviewees, though each described it in different ways: negotiating, consulting, influencing, educating. In their roles, they need to negotiate with SMEs and trainers constantly. They educate stakeholders on the best way to present their content and influence them to agree to their instructional design plans.

*You need buy-in from your stakeholders. And the only way to get that buy-in is to be able to have a persuasive narrative to how you are going to deliver, what you're going to deliver, or else they won't use you and your role is inefficient.*

*I talk to people about what their goals are and hear them, and then I translate that into the domain of learning. So there's a lot of educating to do, when I'm consulting with clients, I also have to teach them why you would do something one way or the other.*

“Interpersonal communication skills” is a term that pops up in a great many job postings, not just in elearning but across industries. It’s often tossed in as a standard bullet under qualifications or required skills. But clearly in the elearning industry, this skill should not be overlooked, as it is essential to many tasks in an elearning role.

## Empathy

Academia's identification of “andragogy” as a key skill led me to ask interviewees about the importance of understanding adult learning theories. This is not a concept I was familiar with, as it’s not a skill covered in the technical communicator’s education. In response, multiple interviewees instead discussed the importance of empathy, thinking beyond simply how an adult user might be motivated to learn but thinking through their whole situation in which they might be learning: how they go about their day, their emotions in the moment, the technology mode available for their learning, and what knowledge each individual brings to the learning.

Through their responses, I can develop a description of what someone on the job really needs to understand adult learning theory as. In a nutshell, adults are busy and are goal/task-oriented. They need to be motivated to learn something, and the learning material presented to them needs to clearly show that it will help them achieve their goal. To get adults to pay attention and use your learning content, it needs to be accessible - clear, concise, engaging, and easy to use; it needs to be highly relevant to their situation and readily available on-demand.

*We don't create information-dump learning; it's really action-based learning that is focused on the day in the life of the learner. It's a little bit about adult learning, but it's really about being relevant. Relevant means you understand that day. It's the only way it works. If you don't approach it from that perspective, it's just waste-learning.*

*If it's not accessible, [adults are] not going to be interested in paying attention.*

*Getting in front of them when they need it most rather than pushing it and forcing them to take [a training course] is going to be the better option.*

I think empathy here aligns with accessibility, or user experience. Empathy means you understand your learner's situation and experience, and you design your material to lessen the burden of entering "learning mode" as much as possible. It also means you package your content in smaller pieces and make it easily navigable on the macro and micro level.

### **Curiosity**

The third main skill identified through my interviews was curiosity, or having a curious mindset. This concept often came out when I asked interviewees how they would describe their fluency with technology. No one stated that they were highly adept, or even directly said they were fluent. (Arguably, I would say they are all fluent technology users; their roles demand it!) But instead, many went the route of stating they were "technology curious." The common theme is that while they may not be super users or know the inner workings of a software, they all are willing to explore new tools. This willingness to try out new technology and processes is essential in an industry that is new and still growing rapidly. Things are improving constantly and new tools are regularly developed, and the elearning professional needs to be on top of new advancements and how/whether a new tool will better help a user learn.

*You don't need to be tech savvy, but you need to be willing to try new things. You need to be willing to fail and to get up and try again, making mistakes and not being afraid of new technologies.*

### **Additional Skills: Project Management, Visual Design, Strategy, and Pedagogy**

Additional skills brought up include project management, visual design, strategy, and pedagogy. Depending on the role and organization, an elearning professional may have multiple active projects moving on different timelines. If a project gets put on hold, or another project gets put on a fast track, you'll need to be able to switch quickly.

Again, depending on the role and skills available on a team, you might be heavily involved in creating visuals or laying visual elements. Regardless if a graphic designer is on the team or not, an elearning professional should understand the concepts of visual communication and plan for how visuals will integrate with written content.

The ability to think strategically comes into play once you've spoken with stakeholders and SMEs. The elearning professional evaluates the stakeholders' goal and figures out the steps the learner needs to take to reach that goal.

*You have to be able to strategize and take unknowns or complicated problems and be able to simplify and deliver.*

When it came to pedagogy, interviewees had mixed thoughts. In the corporate elearning industry, the concept of pedagogy is best seen through the usage of instructional design models, such as ADDIE. Many job posts state they require applicants to have knowledge of instructional design models, however no interviewees identified this knowledge as a top skill. Three interviewees utilize models, but they each use a different model. Two interviewees didn't mention models at all. One interviewee finds the models limiting, and would rather focus directly on how her specific users

learn and their needs, rather than relying on a design framework based on the average adult, stating that her users are often in a different situation with different needs than the average adult learner. She also finds the models too slow; she works in a more agile environment, working to get content to users fast and then improving or changing as needed after launch. In this argument, empathy and accessibility come first. She finds instructional design models most useful when you're completely lost and don't know how to start.

*I think the problem with models and frameworks is we get so tied up in it that we forget that we need to reach out to a place to say, what actually do you need to learn? How do you actually learn at your computer? Oh, you don't even have a computer. Okay, let's scrap the computer. How are you going to want to learn the stuff? Oh, you're gonna want to learn it in a Word document? Okay, let's go that route.*

In general, the skills identified through my research match the 10 skills Sun et al. (2018) present. Content management and creation is the basis of any elearning role: the product someone actually produces, whether it's writing, creating visuals, developing interactivity, or other pieces. This rightly is the top skill, and was not directly mentioned through my interviews as a skill because of its obvious nature, though interviewees did often cite the skills of writing and visual design. Collaboration skills, as defined by Sun et al., includes "collaborating with experts, stakeholders, and managers" (p. 83) and so matches what interviewees termed as interpersonal skills. While interviewees pushed beyond adult learning theory (andragogy), the concept of empathy and fully understanding the adult learner is clearly crucial. Sun et al. separately broke out website knowledge (LMSs) and digital technology mastery (creation and editing tools). Experience and willingness to learn the technical and web-based tools of the trade is a must and matches with my interviewees' curious mindset skill.

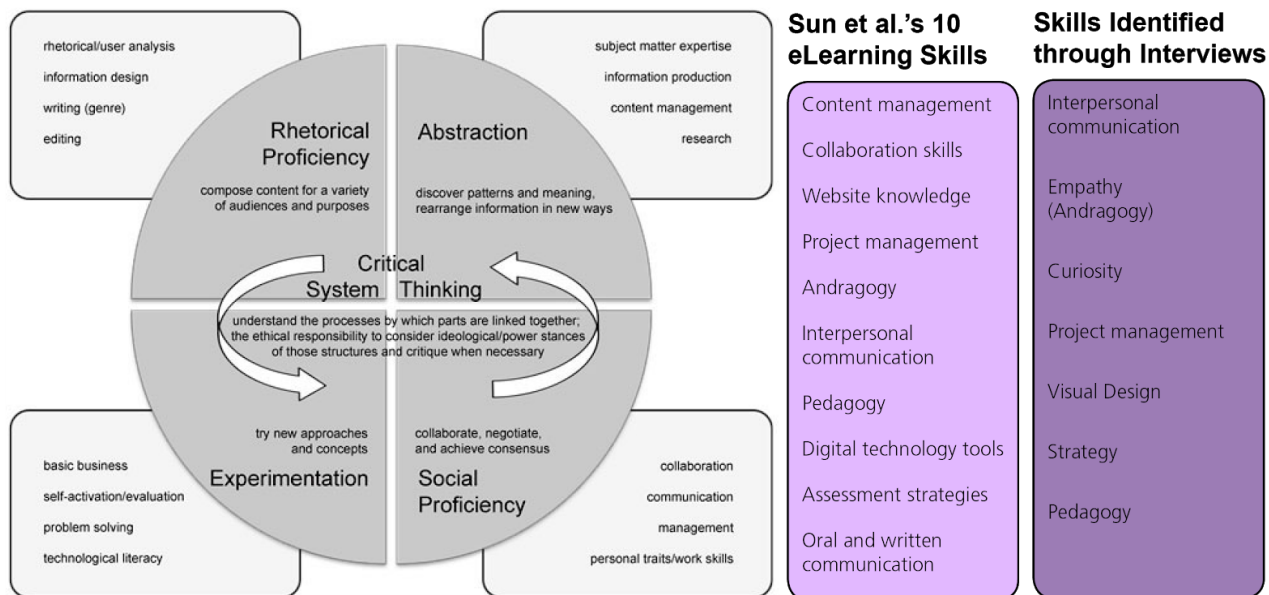


Figure 3. Henschel and Melancon's "Explanatory Matrix" with Sun et al.'s 10 elearning competencies and results from my interviews.

Thus, I would conclude that the 10 elearning skills are still accurate and are relevant to the Twin Cities elearning industry, and most likely nationally. The connections I have made between these skills and those of a technical communicator show that we are indeed equipped to tackle elearning roles. What follows is a small, introductory guide for technical communicators interested in exploring a role in elearning, compiled from my research.

## Guide

### Job Titles

Instructional designer is the most common job title in elearning development; generally someone who supports initial strategy and planning, develops course plans, and creates/oversees creation of learning content. In my initial literature review, I came across two blog posts that explain the similarities and differences between a technical writer and an instructional designer. Anderson (2014) identifies instructional designers to have “more formal grounding in the psychology of learning” whereas technical writers have “more refined skills in verbal communication.” He acknowledges that “recent developments in communication tools and changes in the way we think about learning have caused the boundaries between the disciplines to become fuzzier.” He concludes his discussion of the two by stating that they are currently complementary roles. Johnson (2010) comes to a similar conclusion, stating, “Both need each other. The instructional designer needs access to the content that users need to learn. The technical communicator<sup>1</sup> needs to present the content in a way that users can learn it.” One person I interviewed had a team like this; he would take the documentation created by technical writers and turn them into elearning courses. When I explained my project to this interviewee, he wondered if I instead wanted to interview a technical writer. Both Anderson and Johnson see a blurring of the lines between the two roles, and I think that spot in the middle is technical communication. As my research concludes, technical communicators are well-equipped to take on instructional design roles.

Five of my interviewees would describe themselves as instructional designers, though some carry different titles unique to their organization. (My sixth interviewee is in a leadership role). Because of the variations on this title, and taking into consideration other common titles, when looking for an elearning role, try any combination of these titles and keywords:

E-learning developer	Curriculum developer	Learning and development specialist
eLearning instructional designer	LMS administrator	eLearning development and training specialist
eLearning course developer	Training and knowledge management specialist	Instructional technologist

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson uses “technical communicator” and “technical writer” interchangeably, but he is describing what I would only call a “technical writer”

## **Agency Work vs. Internal Corporation Work**

Within elearning, there are two main routes for types of jobs: providing product externally to clients as an elearning agency or working as an internal resource within a company to produce products for employees or clients.

Two of my interviewees work in elearning agencies. When working at an agency, your team will most likely be composed of experts that support instructional design, content writing, visual design, strategy, and development. A team like this will produce top-of-the-line, highly polished materials for a client. Teams will include a project manager, instructional designer, and course developer, and additional experts in graphic design, animation, videography, technical developers, and others needed for each project. On small teams, an individual might need to wear a few expert hats, but no one individual completes all of the tasks on an elearning project. Of this, one interviewee said, “In a way that's almost cooler, I still get to play in all those different fields, but I'm more advising and giving direction instead of actually executing the work.”

Within a larger company, you might create resources for employee learning and development, or you might create supplementary material to products the company sells. As an internal corporate resource, you are more likely to do everything from information gathering to content creation, development, and content management. Team structure is more varied, depending on the company. There might be multiple instructional designers (or similar roles to what you fill) each supporting different employee groups or product lines. Interviewees on these types of teams described how they learn new technical skills and expertise from their co-workers as needed. Perhaps someone else has experience with voice-overs or interactive programming, and you might draw on them to support your project that needs that skill.

Agencies will use a greater variety of technologies and will more quickly adapt to new elearning modes to best support their clients' wishes. Companies supporting internal elearning creation are often years behind on adopting the latest software and modes of content creation. Instructional designers in these roles will have to push harder to move and rework legacy training material into more interactive presentations. Two interviewees discussed their struggle to push material out of dull PowerPoint slide decks that users simply click through, instead wishing they could incorporate more video or interactive checkpoints. When looking for an elearning role within a company, it's important to thoroughly investigate the tasks expected and opportunities to improve processes to ensure you will be satisfied in the role.

## **Tools**

eLearning professionals utilize a wide array of technological tools to create and manage their learning content. This list is by no means all-encompassing, and will no doubt be out of date within a number of years due to the rapid pace of technological advancement. Many job postings will state that knowledge and/or experience using some of these tools is required.

Graphics and Document Content Creation Tools	Video and Animation Content Creation Tools	eLearning Course Creation and Interactivity Tools
Adobe Creative Suite: Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator  Microsoft Office Suite: Word, PowerPoint	Adobe Creative Suite: After Effects, Premiere Pro  Camtasia  Live video production tools	Adobe Captivate  Articulate 360/Articulate Storyline  SAP Enable Now  WalkMe
LMS Softwares	Instructional Design Theories	Collaboration and Project Management Tools
Blackboard  Canvas  Asentia  ...Many others  <a href="#">Guide to LMSs</a>	ADDIE  SAM  Bloom's Taxonomy  <a href="#">Guide to 4 Instructional Design Models</a>  <a href="#">ADDIE vs. SAM</a>	Google Docs  Slack  Wrike  Basecamp

While job postings list the requirements of the *ideal* candidate, and someone without prior knowledge of a tool could be considered for the position, you can improve your prospects by learning the tools on your own through video training and/or (when possible) purchasing the tool yourself to practice with.

## Resources

To develop skills and keep up to date on new technologies, here is a short list of resources my interviewees described as being helpful in their continued learning.

- Informational interviews with professionals in the field are always recommended! Review the questions I asked in my research as a starting point for discussion, if needed.
- For learning new software or other skills, [LinkedIn Learning](#) offers great instructional videos if you have a subscription or access through an organization
- For new ideas on anything related to user design, follow the [Nielson Norman Group](#)
- Also listen to the [Wireframe podcast](#) for additional perspectives on user experience design
- [Minnesota's Professional Association for Computer Training \(PACT\)](#)
- Society for Technical Communication's [Instructional Design and Learning Special Interest Group](#)
- Find great articles, tools, and jobs at [eLearning Industry](#), an online community for elearning professionals
- Subscribe to Adobe or other software providers' newsletters to learn about the latest features and new tools



## Future of the eLearning Industry

Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic has already greatly increased the demand for elearning solutions, in the corporate world as well as the academic, and it seems likely that this rapid growth won't die back down but will instead influence what normal life looks like post-crisis. This growth will supply a wealth of new positions for technical communicators to fill, and as the industry grows, new innovations in technology and processes will no doubt surface, requiring professionals to keep learning and adapting.

Recent trends in elearning include micro-learning and on-demand/just-in-time learning. Both of these concepts move away from the need to assign in-depth, hour-long or more training courses to employees. Micro-learning is most often seen as 2-5 minute videos that teach a small skill or concept. 5-20 short videos might be cataloged together as a full course, but users can watch just the videos (like training segments) that they find relevant or interesting. Micro-learning facilitates regular professional growth, making it easy for employees to spend a few minutes each week learning something new, fitting in learning around busy schedules.

On-demand or just-in-time learning also requires training to be segmented into small chunks that just teach one skill. A highly organized catalog of just-in-time learning content allows employees to search and find the training they need to solve a problem they are facing in that moment. They can complete the relevant learning and then continue with their work. These pieces of content can then be linked directly within company software tools or products so that the needed guide is extremely accessible right in the spot it should be used.

*In a corporate landscape, learning is all about solving a problem. If employees have the freedom for 30 minutes to do anything, they're not going to just learn. Learning happens when a problem arises, and they need to quickly solve it.*

An added benefit of smaller elearning content is that it's easier to update chunks and republish as needed. This method does create a larger catalog of content to be managed, however. Even more attention is needed to properly categorize, tag, and label content so employees can find exactly what they need.

On the near horizon, elearning professionals need to be preparing for the next generation of learners. Their base understanding of how technology works will be higher. They will be more willing to use technology throughout their day. They will also have higher expectations for the quality and interactivity of elearning. These are all changes to a professional's understanding of the user's day and what knowledge they may or may not bring to an elearning course.

*I think the workforce that are coming in have been using apps that have been decreasing their attention span. Also, they're more collaborative with their apps and so creating learning that keeps them interested and invested will be key.*

Beyond new technology in the elearning industry specifically, the wider use of smart speakers, wearables, and artificial intelligence is changing society in general. What happens when an

employee asks their company-provided smart speaker how to complete a simple task? Just-in-time learning will need to move from text, visuals, and video snippets to a clear audio explanation with voice-activated interaction to navigate between steps and provide additional guidance when a user is stuck. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) tools are still in the early stages of development, but professionals using their hands or machinery in their work already saw the usefulness of tools like Google Glass. One interviewee is eagerly exploring how elearning might be facilitated through AR. True to being an elearning professional, his curiosity is leading him to dig into new technology, even though he has no previous background in it. Potentially affecting the future of all sorts of jobs is artificial intelligence (AI). AI already enhances our abilities to collect and analyze data, but it will eventually also take over some of the mundane tasks that take up an employee's time. Those employees will need to improve other skills or learn new skills to grow their roles. This will grow the demand for elearning.

## Conclusion

The path to becoming an instructional designer or fulfilling a related elearning role is not set in stone. eLearning is a new industry that is still rapidly growing. While there are degree programs in instructional design, not having one isn't a barrier to the field. Only one of my interviewees had a degree in instructional design, and only about half of the job postings I reviewed included the degree in the list of preferred educational backgrounds, while also often listing communications or liberal arts. One interviewee had a post-baccalaureate certificate in scientific and technical communications. A common theme among those I interviewed was that they were good with technology and had an interest in helping others, and this led them through a variety of roles before finally landing firmly into elearning. Many didn't know about the world of elearning when they started their career journeys, but they have found a variety of reasons to enjoy their work.

*Things are changing so fast with technology and the needs of the market are changing so quickly that you kind of don't know what [elearning] is until somebody you know does it and you end up doing it, too.*

*There's something to [elearning] about organization of information and how to best get a class across to adult learners and long distance learners. I like looking for systems and making things clear, creating order.*

*It's like tech writing but with more interesting visuals, more video.*

*I want to tell good stories, I want to help people tell good stories, and I want people to know what story it is that you're trying to tell. I get to do a kind of storytelling through elearning.*

*What I really love about this job is helping people figure out how to do **their** job.*

*[Learning is] kind of an addiction of mine. Through elearning, I continue to learn new things myself.*

Through this research, I myself have gained more confidence in the fact that technical communicators are entirely capable to support the growing elearning industry through a variety of roles, whether that's instructional design or adjacent roles that are more focused on coding/web development, content organization, or others equally necessary to a successful elearning production.

*In [elearning], there are so many paths to take. Some people go more into the LMS things, some people go more into learning development. I personally am trying to go into AR.*

*A world like on-demand learning is so massive and when you think about elearning, what does elearning mean these days? It has spread out so much and so it's just an interesting place to be.*

Because many employers don't understand what a technical communicator is and does, in comparison to a technical writer, we need to be bold in what job posts we apply for and be explicit in explaining how our skills will fulfill the needs of the company. "[W]hen a technical communicator adapts to fill a role in the workplace, he or she can demonstrate how what technical communicators do is of value to others, thereby gaining power related to both the ability to do and the ability to influence" (Henning & Bemer, 2016, p. 319). The elearning industry is poised to take-off, and technical communicators should embrace the opportunities now, and thus help pave the way for future growth in the technical communication discipline.

## Interview Questions

### **Tell me about your current role**

- What does a regular day/week look like?
- What are regular types of projects you work on?
- Who are your “clients”?
- Who are the stakeholders involved in review and approval?

### **Tell me about your work life and team**

- What does your team structure look like? Core team and extended team?
- What are their specific role titles?
- What does a work flow through the team look like?
- What is your main method of communication as a team?

### **Tell me about yourself**

- Brief background, how you got here, education, past roles
- Earlier in your career, did you expect to be in your current role?
- Describe your technology fluency, in your job or personal life. Do you pick up new tools easily? Find yourself teaching/helping others?

### **Let’s talk about your skills**

- Which of your skills do you value most?
  - Which skills do you enjoy using most?
  - Which skills have you developed more recently?
  - What do you do to continue learning/develop your skills over time?
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- Do you have any further insights to share? Questions I should consider?

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