



## connexions interview with **SCOTT ABEL**

Transcript of the interview with Scott Abel, CEO and Chief Content Strategist at The Content Wrangler, in the United States of America. Scott is a content management strategist and social media choreographer. He is also an editor of technical, medical and scientific documents and books.

The interview was recorded for issue 2(1). It was conducted by Kyle Mattson, via Skype, on November 24, 2014. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Quan Zhou, *connexions'* section editor.

The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/115346026>

### **Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?**

Yeah. I'm an evangelist, so my present career is, my job is to instigate change. There are huge problems in the world of communication, and most companies don't actually think of content or communication as a business asset. And they, certainly, seldom respect it enough to put it on the balance sheet, which I believe it belongs on, and that it needs to be managed efficiently and effectively. Instead, what we have is a creative discipline where we allow people to do almost whatever they want. We give them



**CONNEXIONS • INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION JOURNAL**

2014, 2(1), 119-136

ISSN 2325-6044

personal computers with a folder called “My Documents,” so they feel like they are their documents, and they’re not their documents. They belong to the organization that they work for, whoever they are being paid to create content for. But most organizations don’t even think about content creators, or communicators, as an asset that needs to be managed in that way, because they wouldn’t think about applying processes—strict processes—to them, like they would in a manufacturing plant. So the people who work in the assembly lines, they are viewed as process-oriented, right? But the content creators, they say “Uh, you know, they’re creative.” I’m like “Well, okay, great, creative people, what? they get drunk, they get high all the time, and so they don’t, can’t follow directions.” I mean, I don’t believe any of that. I also believe that creative people can be put into a process, and, then, if you manufacture content the way you manufacture physical goods, you’d be in a much better place. You’d know where you are at any given time. You’d know if there was a slowdown, so, for example, communicators can have things like writer’s block. Try that on an assembly line. “I have steering wheel block. Oh, I just can’t figure out how to put the steering wheel on the car,” and then things just keep going by until the inspector, whose job is to make sure that all the parts are there, and that the product is assembled in the correct way—this could be the job of the editor, right? who could say “Hey, missing a headline, it doesn’t have your byline, it doesn’t have a photo, it doesn’t support our rules.”

So, I think my job is to be an agent of change. I’m not trying to do any harm. I’m just trying to point out the craziness that we, somehow, believe is acceptable in today’s world, because we were taught these rules fifty years ago by people who were taught, you know, by somebody else from fifty years ago. So I think most of the rules of communication are outdated, and they need revisiting.

**What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?**

That’s a good question, because that question, in a nutshell, without the international communication spin on it, has been asked to me many times, and the answer is “My job as a nightclub DJ was exactly what prepared me for this world, because, in nightclubs, especially in dance clubs in the 70s, 80s, 90s, they were customized toward a particular audience, so you would hear a song by a band or by a singer like Madonna, but you

could go to a black club, and you would hear an R&B version of it, you could go to a gay bar, and you would hear a slightly housey version, you go to the Latino bar, you would hear something totally different. It's still Madonna singing. It's just a different base track, it's a different drum track." These were customized for the audience, right? for the persona group that the communicators were aiming at. And they used psychic power to decide what to communicate, right? They assemble all the pieces, and they say "That sounds good. I think people will buy it." And I think we do that, you know. We use our psychic power—we don't, we seldom use science, we use psychic power—and we decide that these words that are coming out of our fingers onto the keyboard, or out of our mouths in an interview, are the appropriate ones to say, or to communicate.

And I think, if you think about the fact that even in an audience—the people watching this video, the people who are in a conference hall, sitting there listening to a keynote presenter—they are all different. Marketers treat them as persona groups, and they aim at them, because it's easier for marketers to do that. There is absolutely no benefit to the end user, right? Persona groups are created for the content creators, to make our jobs easier, and so I think when you see what happens when a DJ plays a song, and it does not resonate with the audience, they don't dance. So, my reward structure has been kind of equating the dance, right? If you put a blog post out, and it doesn't get a lot of comments, or your put a blog post out, and people don't actually complain about it or say something about it, then they're not feeling something about it, right? If you speak at a conference and nobody applauds, not doing well. People get up and they leave the room, which is what happens, right? Or, in the case of communicating on behalf of a brand, when you communicate to somebody, and they wanna buy your product and they do, that communication usually comes from marketing—marketing, you know, they wave their shiny magic disco ball to make you entranced and want their product. Then when you get it, what happens? All the other communication you get were created by different people in different parts of the organization, and yet nobody ever bought a product from the marketing department. They bought the product from the brand. So the brand continues to fail them when the technical communication does not sound as easy as the marketing. The marketing was so much fun and easy and all you had to do is reach out and grab the product, because they had it there waiting for. Then you had to learn how to use it. You have to call support and be transferred to

another country, where you're disconnected. Then you have to start all over again. You wait in the queue. Then they tell you they're closed. And when you finally get a hold of somebody, they tell you to check the website. Then they start reading aloud the same things that you're reading from the website.

This is a giant opportunity for us, today, to admit that we suck at communicating to people. By and large, we do. We think that we do a decent job, and I don't believe, today, good enough is good enough. I think that we can do better. We can harness the power of technology. We can harness the power of personalization and personalized content for individuals. We can know things about people. If all the silos in an organization were to communicate to one another, and stop worrying about the external communication—just learn how to communicate to each other, inside—I think we would find that consumers would be less aggravated at the end, and they would be loyal to a brand. And the brands that are good at this—Apple is a prime example—they don't even have to worry. There can be a negative story about how stupid this new device is, and there will be thousands of people at every Apple store, waiting outside to purchase a device that people say is stupid, too big, it bends, it's gonna break, but they'll pay a thousand dollars for it, and they'll wait in the line for it. They're loyal. And so, I think that we can learn some lessons from these companies that have great communication; that across the board, they try to do a better job than anybody else. And I think that means that we have to learn from technical communications.

So, to answer your question, the one job that, outside of my DJ experience, was working in the technical communication field. I worked for a large manufacturer that had a challenge creating content that people could understand. They needed to make software eventually, even though it was not their primary product, but, eventually, software entered the equation—they made software as well to help their product to work better—and that software would run on Macintosh, it would run on Windows, it would run on Unix, and we would have a challenge trying to create a manual that would support all these different groups of people, who were using the same product, but on different product platforms, right? on different computing systems. And so, we would create a big manual, and we would say “If you are on Macintosh, do this.” Right? and there would be a screen shot. And you would say to yourself “I'm not on Macintosh. You know I'm not on Macintosh. I just bought the Windows version of this software.

Why are you giving me this information I don't need." It was purely, again, for us. It was easier for us. We could put it all on one big book, and, then, we could say "Oh, my gosh, you can search a pdf. Let's just give it to the customer, and let them find it." Well, that's a lot easier, isn't it? We don't have to do any work, then. We just give them everything and say "Here's everything."

So, I think my lesson from technical communication was that you cannot actually create all these different deliverables and rely on humans to do them alone. If your company does not have an unlimited pool of resources, because the only way your company can grow is to introduce new products to rev up version one, and make version two of your product, right? to make the 2014 version of the Ford car that's now 2015, and so on. And that means that you still have to support the customers that are using the older products, and you have to sell the new products, and create new customers from either the old customers or some prospects that have never interacted with your work. And, in order to produce all that information in a world where, now, you have different devices on which the content is consumed, you don't ever know how skinny it is, or how tall it is, or how wide it is, and so you can't actually finagle with the content, like desktop publishing, and lock it down, because you never know what it's gonna look like at the other end—these are terribly frustrating, confusing things. But if you master them, the way technical communicators—not all of them—but as a discipline, there is a section of technical communication that does very well at producing content that's fluid, that can adapt to the devices, that can adapt to the end user, the personal things about the customer. And I think all communication can benefit from that.

**What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

There's so much. There's so much bad stuff and so much good stuff. I think that you get equal doses of both. I would say, recently, the—as I alluded to, before—the technical communication industry created single sourcing, where they would write something once, and they would deliver it to multiple output formats, simultaneously. That discipline has matured into a discipline of its own called intelligent content, which is basically about giving content semantic value, so that it's semantically rich and

highly structured so that both machines and people can consume it and process it. That intelligent content *invention*, if you will, has changed the way that companies think about information—not all of them, but, definitely, some bigger ones—and they are able to be more agile. They are able to do more with less. They are more efficient. They can republish, repurpose their content, almost instantaneously. There's no more handcrafting. There's not as much copy and paste, you know, which is error prone and slow, and not easy to undo, if you just decide later you wanna update all the things that you copied and pasted—how will you remember where you copied and pasted everything? I can't remember where I put my car keys, you know. I think that's the big thing. Silicon Valley is a driver for that, as are any industries in which the products will kill you if they are misused or somehow abused, or just, you know, airplanes, for example, can kill you. So they definitely had a risk, and they were trying to avert the risk, and so, if they could become more efficient, more effective, they could use the extra time they saved to innovate, and to prevent errors, to prevent quality defects, to prevent people dying from products, or drugs, or anything else.

**What would you say are some challenges of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

I would speak universally, and say the belief that professional communicators' value is, somehow, in... their value is mistakenly viewed as being their communication. And I'll tell you this by example. So, you're supposed to write well. It's not some magical thing. If you can't string three sentences together into some kind of comprehensive... you have bigger issues than whether or not you're a great communicator, right? You're supposed to be able to graduate from high school. I realize in certain countries, including our own, sometimes this is a challenge, but in university settings and professional settings, you're supposed to be able to communicate. Stop talking about how good of a writer you are. You're supposed to be a good writer. You are not supposed to create crappy content. What you're supposed to do, however, that you're not probably doing, is learning about advanced communication practices. So, for example, we live in a world where I argue that we should write... we write for machines first, people second. Okay, of course we write for people. That's the end destination. But first, in between me and the person, is

usually some kind of computer system. There's some wires, there's an electricity, there's the Internet, there's Wi-Fi, there's devices, there's all kinds of other things that come in between us. For example, in the international landscape... so I write in English. Big deal. Only four percent of human beings live in the United States. Only six percent of human beings can understand past the sixth-grade level of information in English. So I need to write content that a machine translation system can understand, if I truly want to be international. If I really want my content to be consumed by people in other nations, I need to supply it in a way that they can consume it, that they understand it, and that happens to be in their own native language. And the only way to get there is either to be able to translate all that—which is ridiculous—or you have to be able to write in a way that a machine can understand it.

Well, we have a lot of problems with the way that we communicate. One of them, when you're trying to use machines to help you translate, is that we use synonyms. You know, those words that almost, kind of, sort of, but not really, mean exactly the same thing, because they are not identical. And yet we treat them like they are. We, and the Japanese, because we're the only two languages—English and Japanese—that have a thesaurus. So, the ridiculous part is that we have ambiguous language. So, of course we put our ambiguous language into Google Translate, and it comes out being garbage, because we don't know how to write for machines. We write lengthy sentences that are grammatically correct, but way too long for a machine to process—which happens to be around 23 words or so, they start to break down—and also sentence structure, between Romance languages and character-driven languages, and other kinds of languages, left to right, right to left. They're different, right? And so we Americans... American English is different than some other English, right? And we put words in different places in a sentence than somebody else, and so, we invent a lot of things ourselves, and we're... you know, we've got ingenuity, this is a good thing. But sometimes we invent things that don't have the shelf life we wish they did.

So, I blame all these problems on my fifth-grade language arts teacher, Mrs. White. You might have had a Mrs. White, too. I had one. They were named different things. But they were fifth grade teachers, who taught us about sentence structure, diagramming, whatever it was that they taught you. But, in my case, they taught us in a book called *Language arts*. Today, we do not need language art, we need language

science. We need to understand how linguistics work. We need to understand how other cultures' language work. We need to understand how the Internet works. We need to know what happens when you ask Siri a question. How does Siri get the answer? And if we don't provide the content in a way that Siri can get the answer and deliver it to the people who were asking the questions, Siri is not going to deliver like "Here's a big-ass pdf, search in there, find out, it's in there, somewhere." It's not gonna happen, right? And so I think, that's one of the biggest challenges, today. It's that we're still locked in these old rules. We also believe, somehow—I don't how this is even possible—but we believe that style guides, somehow, are useful. And I say, style guides are a starting point to being useful. Style guides by themselves—again, going back to the "I can't remember where I put my car keys, but you expect to believe that I can memorize 700 rules, plus all the grammar, linguistics, spelling, and typography rules that I've had to memorize." And, somehow, I'm supposed... you're supposed to believe me that, on demand, I can read content I've never seen before, and recall all of these things, and correct them without making any errors. It's ridiculous. However, in authoring tools today, we can encode style, linguistics, grammar, spelling, and branding rules, and prevent authors from ever making those mistakes. Wouldn't that be a smarter way to do it?

Now, immediately my editor friends say "Oh, my god, he's trying to get rid of our jobs." No, I'm not. I think editors should read the content. They should augment it, and make it better. Maybe they're curators of related information. Maybe they say "This would be a great place for a video to accompany this article or communication of some kind." And they seek out, in their own or external resources, some other piece of content that would further add context and value to the end user.

So, I think it's just a reimagination. We need to reimagine our goals. And we need to reimagine our roles and the responsibilities that we play. And it can no longer be limited to cleaning up typos, and making sure that a portmanteau of a product name goes together with the second word capitalized, because the marketing people would freak out if you don't do it, you know. It just seems like busy work that we need to get rid of. And we need to start focusing on how do we make the content processable by machines? How do we make it fully understandable by humans? And how do we open it up to the world so that we're not limited because of our education? I think these are all problems that we can solve, and they are all doable.

I also speak at the Translation Automation Society. And I've been able to moderate some panel discussions, and they put me on there on purpose—which is kind of funny; my friends who know me say “You don't even speak another language, how can they be inviting you to a translation event.” Well, the reason why is that I understand technology, and I understand how content and technology work together. And so they asked me to moderate a panel between language service providers, so companies that sell translation and localization services, and people who buy them who work for big companies, and there is a huge disconnect. The people who buy them are getting offered new disruptive technologies like crowd-sourced translation, like most Facebook content is translated by Facebook customers. We're talking about the Facebook interface. Now, not the legal statement, 'cause that will get them sued, right? The lawyers have to do that, and there needs to be lawyers in the country in which the person is reading the notice. It's not really useful to have a California notice in Italian, right? Like, if you're in Italy, really, the California law has nothing to do with Italy. So, there needs to be some kind of... you know, we need to come together to try to figure out how to solve all these problems. But I think there is a bigger issue here about thinking through the process of what our communication is supposed to be *today*, in the world that we live in, and future proofing it for tomorrow. Stop worrying about what the rules were in the past. It doesn't really matter anymore, because we can't go backwards. But we *can* go forwards.

**How do you see technology or changes in technology impacting, maintaining, or altering international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

This all goes back to the same question of whether or not we're creating the right *kinds* of communication. So, in text-based communication, I think, there is an argument to be made either way. So, most of the time, think back to when you were a child, and you were very excited, something happened, and you ran up to an adult, and you tried to explain, but it was all discombobulated, 'cause you were freaking out about whatever it *is*, right? Especially if it's the first time it's ever happened to you. Somebody got hurt, and there's something, you know, and you try to tell an adult. Often they say “Slow down. Start at the beginning. Tell me, tell me what happened.” This happens every

time a police officer enters the equation. “Blah blah blah blah blah.” Everybody wants to tell the officer “It’s his fault. It’s her fault. Blah blah blah.” And they’re all fighting. And the officer says “Step back. One at a time. What happened? Start at the beginning, and tell me a story.”

I think we’ve been trapped in the narrative—and that, today, there is a need for non-narrative content. Content without so much context. Content that’s kind of, you know, out there on its own. Answers to questions, for example. When you talk to Siri, you’re not asking Siri to do an evaluation of something for you. You know, when you query Google, you’re asking “Help me find this. I need the answer to this.” And the problem is, most of our communication is locked up inside documents and videos and audio files. And it’s not extractable. There is not enough... there’s no, or insufficient semantic information inside to allow a computer to go inside to pull out just the answer. So, the only things that we get answers to are the things that have been provided in modules—modular content, kind of componentized-based content. And when you have components of content—which is what I believe we should have more of—you can mix and match them, you can recombine them, much the way DJs recombine sounds so that they can make Madonna appropriate for different audiences. And if we can recombine content, repurpose it, and share it with others... For example, what if an audience could take the content that you communicate and repurpose it and reimagine it and remix it, themselves? Like, why shouldn’t they be able to? I don’t understand. If it’s useful information to them, and you’ve provided it, why do you care? Now they can do it, today. They can go to your web page and copy a paragraph and paste it someplace else. But we’re not making it easy for them.

So think about this. The *New York Times*. No doubt, journalistic prowess. Great writing. Good investigative reporting, no doubt. However, they released a report called the Innovation report—*release* is the wrong word; it was leaked. It was a one-hundred page internal investigation about the readiness of the *New York Times* to be able to compete in the world in which they exist today and in the future. And the short answer is: They’re not ready. They’re way behind. They’ve ignored things for years that they should have paid attention to. They didn’t invest in the technologies that should have invested in. They didn’t invest in teaching writers that their value is not in writing only, that they have to understand technology. So, now, they have disrupters. *BuzzFeed*,

*Huffington Post*. They can get millions, tens of millions of hits off the same content that the *New York Times* should be getting. But the *New York Times* traffic? Down. Every year, every day, it never goes up. Doesn't matter: Mobile? Down. Ebooks? Down. Website? Down. It doesn't matter because they are not where people are. People are on Facebook. That's where *Huffington Post* is, and where *BuzzFeed* is, and where everybody else is. So those pseudo-media organizations—'cause that's exactly what the *New York Times* thought of them, I'm sure, and they also thought... other journalists thought the same thing earlier in our lifetime with *USA Today*, which they used to call McDonald's news, right? It was just snack-size news, not really news. So they won't be around long, right? They said the same thing about the *Huffington Post*. They're like, they read other peoples' articles and, then, summarize them. And they're like, Right, and millions of people wanted to read this stuff, right?

So the *New York Times* did do something really cool. They created a collection. What they have is an asset, a content library that's an asset. They have millions of articles of the last hundred years or so. And what they were able to do was they were able to assemble a story *collection*, if you will, of a topic—in this case, I think it was brothels, they were writing about brothels, something about the Netherlands—and they expanded on it, and they went back in history, and they had all these pictures of, you know, brothels that were in the newspaper—in America and other countries. Articles, stories, statistics, facts—for the last hundred years. They called it a collection. Then, they promoted it. It was one of the highest ranking pieces of content they've ever produced. However, they can't do it quickly. They have to do it by hand. Which means they can't respond to change. The minute that somebody else wants to do it, they're gonna do it faster than the *New York Times*, and they're going to populate it, while the *New York Times* is still messing around in the news room, trying to copy and paste content that they're, you know, making mistakes, and formatting by hand, like it's all very 1988, there. And they recognize that this is a huge challenge.

But why that's important is that it's not about the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* could have owned the conversation on this, and the irony is they would have been extremely popular with audience, and they would have attracted a huge amount of attention if they would have released that one hundred-page report in the newspaper, and interviewed every corporate person in big companies and vendors that

know, because they sell software and services to help you do better, and companies that are overwhelmed, or have been in lawsuits because of their content. Those people would have told the *New York Times* because they're reputable as a journalism piece, you know. It's not like being invited to be embarrassed on television. This is something where they could have owned the conversation. And they could have been--went out and hired the best people to do the best work. You know, snatch them from Silicon Valley and other places and built a world class media empire for the 21st century. But they're not. You know, they're still trying to figure it out. Now, they are embarrassed now, because the report was made public. So they are definitively making strides in the right direction.

But one of the key things in the report, which I believe is true for all communication across most organizations, is that it gets more expensive to fix this problem the longer you wait. And the second point was disrupters will enter your field. They enter education. And they take jobs from professors. So people in academia should get with the picture quicker than anybody else, but they don't either. They sit back and they rest on their tenure, and they rest on their experience, and then they think "You know. Whatever." And then that department gets defunded. Why do you think there is a School of Information? I lecture at UC Berkeley's School of Information. It's the demise of library science that no one signed up for. Yeah, there's value in library science, but not if there is no students. If no students show up, what is the value? Right? So we had to take and merge computer science with information science and library science, and bring it all together. And then, there wasn't even a cohesive way to teach the intersection until some of the professors actually created it.

And so, I think this is all new turf is what I'm saying. The research has been around for years. There are companies that have been doing better than other companies. They don't want you to know, so it's not easy to see, because if it's a competitive advantage, why are they gonna tell you? Or educators? Right? Because they want to keep their story a secret. You'll never see an Apple employee at a typical content conference. Think back. Unless it was Steve Jobs or the CEO, their employees are forbidden from telling what they do. Why? 'Cause they do it better. They know it. They invest in it. They really treat communication as critical. When was the last time you saw a television commercial that was an ad, a marketing piece, and technical documentation? The very first iPhone commercial was, and, since then, they've had dozens of them. They held up

the phone. They started touching it. They asked Siri to find a sushi restaurant. People were bedazzled. It's marketing. It's advertising. It's technical documentation. And, to a certain extent, it's training, because if you buy an iPhone and you watch the commercial, if you do what's on the screen, Siri will find a sushi restaurant for you too. But think about that. They had to make a conscious decision to unify that communication, to make sure that it fulfilled all the needs: it had desire, sexy—you know, it was sexy—it was informative, it was useful, it was different than anything else, and it provided a solution you couldn't get anywhere else. So it's amazing.

**What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skill sets has higher education taught students to help them transition to industry? In what ways could higher education do a better job preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?**

Higher education institutions—and I'm certainly not an expert on what every higher institution is doing, right? with their education, today; so I don't really know what every school and university is doing—but I would say, for the most part, I was fortunate when I was educated, because I was educated in a campus where I had both professors and instructors. The instructors were usually professionals who are in the field. For instance, I was taught by a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, the only journalist to win two Pulitzers in a row, who only graduated from seventh grade, by the way, never went to high school or college, and still ended up becoming a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. And he taught me more than any other, you know, instructor, because he taught me practical stuff. He would take us underneath bridges and make us look at the crumbling infrastructure of the bridges so we could write about bridges. He would make us go and work with the bridge repair people. He would make us go and learn about train tracks that go over the bridge, and why it's so critical for the bridge to have the support that it has. He didn't tell us to go to the library and read. He would take us out, and meet the actual people who do the work, and they were hypnotized by a whole bunch of students. They couldn't imagine that we would want to know what they did, you know. So it was very practical.

So, I think one of the best things that higher education has done is incorporated professionals into the mix. For me, I co-lecture with a professor, and I'm often brought

in, I think, just to do the reality check at what's going on the field, to wax poetic about what I've seen recently—maybe inspire them to do something different. But I'm also a troublemaker. I think that universities need that. It's not really sufficient for—and I'm going to get hate mail for this—it's not really sufficient for some kind of academic to be sitting in the cubicle forever, because my question is “When was the last time you had a real job?” And this is the kind of response I get “Education is a real job.” And I'm like “Not if you're teaching technical documentation. When was the last time you documented a medical device? When was the last time that you documented a nuclear device? When was the last time that you documented a process for a pharmaceutical company? When was... If you haven't done this stuff in a while, you really do not actually know that rhetoric, no one freaking asked for that. It is never, ever, ever... I'm pretty confident, if there's any time that there was ever rhetoric listed on a job requirement, it was written by an academic. Because no one asks for this shit. They just want people to have the practical skills, and that's really hard to give you... to get from a university. We know that universities should be teaching you how to think critically, how to go out and find your own answers. That's all great, important stuff. But when I have students coming out of the educational system who still are being taught by people about writing, and it's only about writing, or it's about communicating, and they skip over the other things that they're gonna need to know—like change management, work flow, governance; governance, yeah, you're gonna have people boss you around, you're gonna be responsible for stuff, and, by the way, all that stuff that your teacher told you won't matter. When you go to get your job, they're gonna be like “It doesn't matter, anymore. I don't care what your professors told you.”

So, I think there needs to be a balancing act between professionals and academics, and they need to come together more often. But, it's really up to the university program administrators to drag, you know, probably some of the academics kicking and screaming. Because it is kind of insensitive in some respects to... I think when it really gets to be important is when you ask for students to evaluate the instructors and the instructors do better than the professors. That, right there... you know... And that's not always the case. I'm not slamming all of them. I know some wonderful professors. I personally benefit from them all the time. But I do think that there is a challenge in academics to bring them together, and I think that you can learn from one another.

Now, how could industry and academia work better together? Well, certainly the School of Information... In fact, I just recently refereed a translation company who wanted to try to figure out “How can we get students to start leaving school thinking about translation and localization?” Where do they send them? Some foreign affairs thing, or some department that has something to do with *foreign*, right? It’s like, okay. But what about every other person who’s graduating from this university? We’re communicating on Facebook. I don’t have a problem connecting with people. I have a problem communicating with them. I can connect with people from Saudi Arabia. I just can’t speak Arabic, right? And so, I think the challenge is: How do we prepare this new generation of students, with all education that we have that we learned from other people—and I’m not talking about doing new research. Of course, we do new research, and we learn new things. But there’s a lot of stuff that’s inherent that we just keep passing down, like somehow it’s the torch, and you’re just supposed to give to the next student generation, and they’re supposed to run with it, and then they teach their kids the same thing, and it goes down, forever. For example, the thesaurus rule, right? don’t ever use the same word more than two or three times in the first couple of paragraphs. That’s not even a rule, right? That’s so squishy that it’s got holes in it, all over the place. And yet, we think that that’s a rule, so we continue to teach it. We talk about things that are really out of context, today. Storytelling. Ah, it’s critical—if you have time for a story. First, you should say “What do you want? Do you want a story? Or do you want an answer? Oh, you want an answer. Wait, let me give you the answer, right?”

And I think that academia and partnerships with private industry like translation companies that want to prepare students. But they don’t want to prepare foreign language students to translate. They should be able to. I mean, they should at least be closer to translators if they learn multiple languages. They want all communicators to know what barriers they are placing in their communication for other people to understand. For example, in the United States, dozens... well, what?... tens of millions of Spanish-speaking people from other countries have English as a second language, and we introduce a bunch of confusing lingo because our fifth-grade teacher taught us to. And they are trying to understand our language. It is not their language. So, if we were more cognizant of plain English, for example, instead of complicated creative

writing English, we would be more successful in reaching those audiences, and compel them to do whatever we want them to do with our communication.

**What has industry done well to help higher education teach international and intercultural experiences and skill sets, or to help their own employees develop such experiences and skill sets? What else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?**

This is an easy one, because industry hasn't done enough. However, it depends on your goal. Every business, every industry, every sector, every company, every nonprofit should have a mission, right? That's what they exist to do. But the mission is often confused with the goal. Goal is part of strategy. I want to become the largest seller of smartphones in the southwest by 2004... in the southwest United States, the largest seller to Latino-Americans in the southwest United States by 2018. That's measurable. It's probably achievable. It's not crazy if you're the No. 2 handset seller and you wanna become No. 1, and you've got your targeted market, you know where you're gonna put your resources. You'll also know whether you fail, right? And so, we need to be able to communicate these industry stories to people and help academia understand, and help other employees, you know, know what's going on in the world. And, I think, by sharing best practices and lessons learned, we get closer to that... and case studies, and webinars, and books, I mean. It's just that, if it's not in the goal of the company, it's usually seen as extraneous.

And so, only the probably biggest, most widely funded companies have budgets to do these kind of partnerships with academia, or to even, you know, train their own people. And training is kind of a hot-button word, too, because training is something that fits into a variety of *packages*, if you will. So, I don't fancy training being going to a conference—and, yet, I run conferences. I just never call them training. Because it's not training. You might learn a few nuggets when you are sitting in there, and you might be entertained, if you're lucky. But it's doubtful that you're gonna learn how to do something, right? It's not a college course.

So I think we need to figure out how to leverage continuing education in meaningful ways so that training and workshops, and things of that nature, are included

in the company culture and not just in the HR brochure that says “Everybody gets you... We respect you. We want you to be learning all the time.” They actually have to build into their calendar time for people to get off work, to be able to stop working on the project that they’re working on at that time, to be able to try to learn something else. And I think they also have to be challenged, you know, to do so. I think the failing is in that most industry does not behave that way. Most people are happy with their good enough job. They’re doing whatever they’re doing. And if they’re not motivated and they don’t push, the company doesn’t come chasing after them. So that training doesn’t ever occur. And I’ve worked in some pretty big, you know, companies. And I’ve seen training be not training at all, in fact: a PowerPoint printed out, three-hole binders stuck, you know, stuck in a three-hole punch binder called Training. No assessment. No questions. They have no idea whether they learned it. They just said like, “Flip through it and then sign this paper.” And I was signing a paper saying that I learned and I was trained on such-and-such methodology. I wasn’t trained on anything!

So, I think there needs to be a critical look at what it is that we’re trying to do, whether we’re educating people, whether it’s part of the goal of the company. And, if it is, then does that make any sense to take part of that money and spend it outside so that the next generation of students who come out of the school will have the skills that we need—because they don’t. Silicon Valley, several other places, maybe, you know, around the world, have some great schools where people are coming out with the requisite skills, and certainly law schools produce lawyers and dental schools produce dentists—I’m not talking about that. But, I mean, just information and communicators, by and large. I don’t think there’s a... I don’t... I guess, I feel like the silos that separate various departments in a company are also existing outside of the company. There are silos between different kinds of communicators—medical writers, and technical writers, and marketing writers, and... trade associations—the marketing people don’t talk to the technical people; in fact, they make fun of each other. And, you know, until we all learn to... that we’re servicing the same customer, the customer is the consumer of our content, of our communication, and that as long as we pretend that being different is acceptable, they’re gonna have confusing experiences with our communication because we are not unified. We’re not fighting to create an exceptional experience with our communication. Instead, we’re just doing our job. And, then, when something fails and it’s downstream, we say “That’s not my department.”

You know, I think companies have to restructure. They have to be able to think across silos. They have to be able to reward employees for thinking outside the box. And, if they were to do that, I think we would see more stories, more lessons, more best practices, and people would share. But I do believe the failing of most large organizations is that they don't encourage us to do that. I think there is lip service to it. "Oh, yeah, we're open for suggestions!" And "Come and see us!" But, I think, if you've done it a couple times, and you didn't get a great warm and fuzzy "We valued that opinion, and that was really useful," I don't think people, then, volunteer to do it again. And I think that's a problem. I think that the company without the people who'd want to make improvements, and to share with others—if the company doesn't encourage it, and doesn't allow it, or doesn't promote it—it makes it harder for the communicators to want to share. You know. So they just sit at their desk, and they do their job. Not all of them, 'cause there's always a loudmouth like me that's gonna fight—try to fight the good fight—even if it means I have to leave the building before long. But those are, probably, some of the things that we could do better. ■

## About the Interviewee

Scott Abel is a content management strategist and social media choreographer with strengths in helping organizations improve the way they author, maintain, publish and archive their information assets. His formal education was in journalism. He worked as a technical writer for ten years. Scott has experience in XML-based enterprise content management strategy, high tech marketing communications, business process analysis, technical writing and editing, crowd-sourcing, social networking, usability, content localization, and designing single source solutions.

**Email.** [info@thecontentwrangler.com](mailto:info@thecontentwrangler.com)

**URL.** <http://thecontentwrangler.com>

**Contact.**

Scott Abel

The Content Wrangler, Inc.

4153 24th Street, Suite #4

San Francisco, CA 94114

USA