



connexions interview with
TATIANA BATOVA

Transcript of the interview with Tatiana Batova, Assistant Professor of Technical Communication at Arizona State University, in the United States of America. Tatiana has also worked as a medical and pharmaceutical translator and writer, as well as a language specialist, interpreter, project manager, and consultant.

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The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/channels/852448>

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

Definitely. Well I'm an assistant professor of technical communication at ASU, and I teach currently global issues of technical communication classes and I teach user experience classes. And in my user experience classes, I bring the idea of writing and creating user experiences for international, global, cross-cultural, multilingual audiences. And I think that international professional communication has always been my very big research interest. For example, in one of my current projects, I'm working with the



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Center for Information Development Management, and we are trying to determine best practices of multilingual quality in a topic-based authoring environment. So what we are looking at is how do we define, how do we understand what a high-quality information product is when it is in multiple languages and how does it depend on our backgrounds, experiences, our education, expertise, and how can we negotiate it if we work in a large team and so on. I'm also co-developing a software which is supposed to help small businesses create and evaluate texts written for global audiences... so with the ideas of global English style guides and writing for translation and localization. So I think that everything I really do has something to do with international professional communication.

I'm also working on a research project from a previous research, which deals with multilingual informed consent documentation in clinical trials... and so how can we make sure that participants, patients, in clinical trials can actually get the best benefits of an informed consent brochure. So I'm looking at multimodal and digital informed consents in multiple languages and assembling them differently for different readers, so.

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

Everything, possibly. My first degree was in foreign language education and my second degree was in technical translation and my PhD was in technical communication, but I think throughout all the years I focused on localization, collaboration, technology, and technical communication. And I worked as a freelance technical translator and interpreter in healthcare settings. I have worked as a localization project manager. So I think everything I really have done in my life had something to do with international communication.

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Oh definitely. I think with the whole idea of the global issues class came from my experiences because what I'm trying to do in the global issues of technical communication is bring together different ideas. We talk a lot about culture, and... these are undergraduate students also, so we start by talking about cultural frameworks and how they were developed, when they work, when they do not work, how you can

create stereotypes when you really rely on them, how can we think critically about what culture is, what a different language is. But then I'm also trying to teach students very practical skills and connect our discussions about culture and language with the discussions going on in localization industry... and the community of translators. And try to teach them, well, let's imagine that you're working for a company and this is your job, and... well, you have to work with international audiences, what are you going to do, what you need to know... the global English, the machine translation, computer-assisted translation, when they work, when they do not work, how do you make a point to your... your boss, your manager, why could localization be better than translation in this case or maybe vice versa. So, I'm trying to combine the... also, I'm trying to include the very, very practical component in it. Everything, of course, comes from my own experiences in project management and as a translator. That's an excellent question.

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

I think that one of the biggest advantages that I see is that we start thinking a lot more about global and cross-cultural classes that we teach in professional and technical communication curriculums, and we pay a lot more attention to international communication in most of the communication classes. And the way I know this is that I keep hearing less and less, almost not at all, that "Oh we don't have time for this international stuff. We have so much stuff to teach already in this class the way it is." So, and I think this is a big step. This is a big step in a very good direction. And I like that we reconsidered the terms we use for international communication to not just talk about communicating with customers, users, readers, audiences from around... from different countries, from around the globe, but we also pay a lot more attention to people who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds within our own country, so I think this is also a very big step.

Also, international professional communication is becoming more integrated generally in people's research agendas because for a number of years, in my experience, you would go to a conference and see all the very different tracks and there is a panel and this panel is international communication and you would have three topics that really,

the only common denominator would be that they talk about something international, but they have nothing to do with one another. And I don't see that that much anymore. So the different topics, kind of... that have to do with something international are more dispersed and better connected with other areas so I really like that and I would like to see more of that also.

And another thing is that the companies in industry with which I'm working, you can see that some companies are outpacing other companies by how they consider that not just the marketing should be adjusted to meet the needs of global consumers but also any types of communication and they start thinking about rethinking their approaches, maybe including localization and transcreation into their practices. And I think this is... this is a start of something really good, so.

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

Well, I think this is connected to something I've just said also because like I said, well, some companies are really thinking about the ideas of localization but... the challenges are, and especially for smaller companies, that we really have very few and definitely not enough of well-defined and also available best practices of how to do it. So that if it is a small business and they realize, well, we could really benefit from localization, what are they going to do without a huge, very huge initial investment? Because there are really very few guideline which I think could become comprehensive.

And I think the biggest challenges, the biggest challenges I think, are the information silos and the different gaps between areas of knowledge and of expertise. And I'm thinking between... even different academic departments and programs, between academy and industry, between units within one company, between disciplines, like technical translation and technical communication. And I think we should be having more connections and we are not... Sometimes we see some of them formed but really not enough.

And maybe another challenge is that... in many cases still when you have people talk about translation as part of international communication, you see that communicating with the global audiences is... there is this rhetoric around that this

is a problem and some type of an obstacle that you need to resolve and overcome, not an opportunity. And I think that's a challenge in the mindset that we need to work on changing.

It is an opportunity. Because it is an opportunity on very many different levels. There is an opportunity for researchers to do research, you know, exciting topics... For businesses, there is an opportunity because all the sales levels that they can have in different countries. This is really an opportunity, not just something that we need to... well, this is something we need to find... we need to solve this problem. This is not a problem, not the way I see it. And I think this positive approach is a lot more... can be a lot more fruitful.

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

Definitely, and I think the technology I'm working with the most is the component content management technologies. And you can see them a lot in international technical communication specifically. And these are other strategies and technologies together so I'm not just gonna say just technologies. But they come with the promise of saving a lot of time and a lot of money and making actually... communication products better. But I'm a very big localization proponent and I think that with component content management technologies we still have a long, a really long way to go before we can use the affordances, the promises that this technology makes to actually improve technical communication products beyond consistency, to think about usability. And... I always hear that tight budget and faster turnaround times, and they are not going away, but then if you think about user-friendly, high-quality technical communication, it's extremely important for so many reasons: ethical, rhetorical, legal, financial, what not. And so, I think... when I think about what technology has to offer, and... thinking critically about what it has to offer and what the disadvantages could be... and my hope is that with component content management, what we can do is we can learn how to use it to adapt information products for global audiences, not just based on language, but based on different information needs, based on different preferences of different users. And it still sounds a little bit out there, but I hope it makes sense what I'm saying.

I think machine translation made very big, a huge progress over the years, but... we still have such a long way to go for machine translation to be a good enough solution. And machine translation is great for something very low fidelity, like when you just want to get some kind of idea of what the text is about. But for anything that really is directed at the users of technology, I think that we have a really long way to go and quite a few years before we can actually say that machine translation can replace... I don't know if we will ever be able to be that far... The whole question of artificial intelligence comes in because the language changes so fast, so unless we think about technology learning constantly and constantly adapting... The language is just too tricky.

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?

Well, I think we are actually in a pretty good place right now with how much attention we pay to the idea of culture and thinking about the terms for describing international communication critically, like cross-cultural, how is it different from intercultural and international. And even the whole idea of culture: How can we define it for different purposes? You know, how can we not define it too narrowly. I think that what I would like to see more, again more practical applications of all those conversations. So, for example for students, if you have experience, you have knowledge, and you talked a lot about what culture is, about social justice. And now it is your first job and you are working on documents or any type of communication products in a company, where are you going to begin? For example, you still have those budgets and those time-lines, right. And you cannot just expect that the things are going to change because you want them to be different. So how are you going to, what are you going to start with? How are you going to make a point? How are you going to help other people with change management. So I'm thinking about the practical applications and I think what I would also like to see... a lot with education is more collaboration between communication programs and translation programs. And in my experience I have not seen enough and we are such natural allies, so I think we should be making more connections, maybe co-taught classes where students get to work on similar projects with students who are

studying something different... but the same in the end because communication and translation, they are so similar from so many different perspectives.

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?

I think this is the most difficult question of all the questions. Because I think with industry it is so difficult to say because it depends on the particular institution or particular company or industry. This is always so place-based in my experience, and I think, partnering with... between practitioners and academics to do research, for example, on best practices is a very good step or student internships, a lot of exchanges, or having speakers invited for workshops within the universities. But then again it is so very place-based. I think that involving students in technical communication programs in industry professional organizations is a great approach and I think this is something we should be doing more. But this is also so extremely challenging on so many different levels. Even if you think about calendars, right. The fiscal calendar and the academic calendar. It is so hard to put them together for students and for instructors. And I think one thing that I always think, and I have been saying a lot about this in the academic environment but also for industry, more connections between technical communicators and technical translators. So within companies, there are more conversations, and I hear this more and more that yes, we should involve technical translators earlier on, not just in documentation development but in product development. But I think this is the area that is really going to bring very many interesting results. And I'm hoping to see more of that.

Well, a technical communicator, in my opinion, is the person...and this is a very difficult question, because a technical communicator does so many different things. But if I were to very much simplify the idea, I think this is the person who develops information... and information products in the source language. And then the technical translator would be the person who develops the same information and the same information products in a target language, so not the source language. For US,

that would be English, for example, and Spanish, or English and Chinese, English and Russian, right. So this is the person who has a lot of experience in the culture... and again... over simplifying how I understand culture but for the sake of this interview... Not even culture, but even the local context of the language, the particular... I don't like saying culture and country together, but I'm going to say just country. So this is why I think there are so many decisions that they should be making together. Because the way you create information in the source language, for example in English, is going to influence so much about how the same information will be portrayed in a different language by the technical translator.

And technical translator I think is a title which is also very limiting, but I don't have a better one so I'm going to keep using it. Because technical translators do not just translate. Many of them are good with localization. Many of them are transcreation experts who know the industry, who know the specifics of this product in a different country. And they don't really translate, they just recreate the information products that can be even in a different genre, a different type of information product for a different language. So they have a very wide area of expertise, not everybody, but some.

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

The global user experience. The user experience is such a large area of study and practice and it's becoming closer to technical communication where technical communicators do a lot of work with user experience, and I think global user experience would be a very interesting area. And some publications are starting to appear. There was just a book published, I think, last year about global user experience. And I'm very excited to see that, that something like this is happening. We are thinking about creating user experiences, and not replicating them but creating different user experiences for people who have different cultural expectations and linguistic expectations. ■

About the Interviewee

Tatiana Batova is an assistant professor of technical communication at Arizona State University. Her major research interests are in the areas of cross-cultural business, technical, and health care communication, content management, digital media, and rhetoric of technology. She has worked as a medical and pharmaceutical translator and writer, as well as a language specialist, interpreter, project manager, and consultant. In 2010 she received the Frank R. Smith Outstanding Journal Article Award from the Society for Technical Communication for “Writing for the Participants of International Clinical Trials: Law, Ethics, and Culture.”

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