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

My name is Kirk St. Amant, and I’m a professor at East Carolina University. I’m a professor of technical and professional communication... and of international studies. And I’m also an affiliated faculty member of international health and medical communication with ECU’s SoCIOLing Lab [see http://blog.ecu.edu/sites/sociolinglab/], which is a linguistics laboratory that looks at doing outreach and engagement activities with the local community.
What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?

I would say my upbringing. I grew up in a very small town on the border with French Canada, which is where I spent most of my life, and there... daily activities were a matter of moving back and forth between two languages: French and English. Also, because it was on the Canadian border, it became a matter of two different currency systems: American currency and Canadian currency... two different systems of measurement: the English system versus the metric system... so you could say that, oddly enough, I sort of grew up in an intercultural environment where everyday activity was... language, culture, different systems, different schemas were always part of life. So... I guess you could say it was always a part of who I am.

And on that, I'll just follow up. Was there a lot of code-switching in your experience?

Very much... a lot of code-switching for sure. A lot of things, for example, not just the language itself you were speaking but how you spoke it. Shifting accent patterns, shifting intonation patterns... quite often, sort of a mixing of languages in terms of finding the term that best represented what you wanted to convey in a given language and conveying it... even if you were speaking a second one... Also, kind of, oddly enough, the cultural references you make. When you grow up with the Americ... ABC, the American television broadcasting system and CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the different cultural reference points that you would pull out, in terms of popular culture, shifted. And so it was kind of a matter of being able to talk about The Beachcombers, which is a Canadian show that came on, and Mr. Dressup, which was a Canadian children's show, versus, say, Captain Kangaroo—an American children's show. And so I think that was one of the interesting things is there was code-switching not just in terms of how you spoke, what language you used, and the way in which you articulated an idea... but the cultural reference points you used, as well, were different, also.
What are your current research projects in industry or academia? In what ways do you hope that these projects will contribute new knowledge to international professional communication practice, research, or pedagogy?

Over the past couple years, I’ve become increasingly interested in health and medical communication in global contexts. And so my research, which had originally been in, sort of, online education, online media, has begun to shift in that direction… sort of, online interaction with patients from different cultures and different regions. And right now, I’m very particularly interested in visual design and how visual design elements need to be rethought in terms of conveying effective information to both health care providers… say physicians or nurses, or other kinds of individuals involved with the… the providing of care, as well as healthcare recipients: patients, their families. How do you configure things, particularly visual-based elements, to engage in what we could call health literacy—or what’s often called health literacy? Teaching the user about the concept or topic in and of itself. So that’s become my focus as of late. And so I began to shift into that direction. What sorts of models from cognitive psychology that look at things like image and how we perceive it can be used to influence the way we study, talk about, and interact with individuals around the concept of health and medical items, ideas… in global contexts?

Do you focus largely, also, on usability and/or accessibility in that area, as well?

Yes… and I think in large part it has to do with rethinking concepts of usability—where the patient becomes at the center of it. So, what is usable in terms of the patient not just as a patient but as a patient from a different culture. That could mean a different language; that could mean a completely different medical system; that could mean a completely different concept of what healthcare is… how it’s offered and how it’s provided. See, usability and user-experience design are very much bound into that. Accessibility also is bound into that in terms of… that’s a culturally pinned concept. What constitutes accessibility? And what guidelines dictating accessibility are based upon the culture in which one finds oneself? And so that makes it really interesting. How do you design for accessibility? That depends upon how that concept is conceived of in the culture with which you’re interacting.
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’d say, in my region in particular, North America, the United States, I think one of the major contributions we’ve made, in relation to international technical communication, is online education… and doing some very pioneering work in those areas. Not just exploring different technologies and how they might be used to deliver education across wide distances, but also pedagogical models—integrate the use of a technology with a pedagogical approach that makes it workable and successful to students in very different regions. And I think that’s important from an international perspective, because it provides a foundation from which you can begin to expand those ideas, those models of education, globally. The catch, however, is not to extend a culturally based model from your culture onto another through an online media. And so I think that is going to be one of the most exciting points right now is… how do you globalization online education? How do you globalization these pedagogical models? I think one thing that technical communication as a field has been very successful in is pedagogy first, technology second… is very much been the approach our field has taken to it… versus “Here’s a technology. Now let’s custom fit a pedagogy into it.” So, I think that’s a great contribution we’ve made, and I think that approach of pedagogy first, technology second will be… will help us, I think, work more effectively with international partners to develop a more effective scheme or approach to collaborating globally in educational contexts.

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 think the greatest challenge in the United States, but also globally, has to due with access. And by access I kind of mean three different things with three interrelated parts. The first is, particularly in the United States, there’s a default assumption that the access we have to online media is universal… and unfortunately that’s not the case. Different regions of the world… different nations… have very different levels of online access to begin with. In some cases, band… broadband is very easy to come by
and others it’s not, so how you use these media to access others internationally is something that really needs to be considered, because it affects everything from the design of an online text: Is it image intensive? Do you have streaming video? That will affect how accessible it is to individuals in other regions with slower connections... Access in terms of, well, how much text do you have to convey? How well does it display on the browsers of the screen the international audience is looking at... becomes an issue, also. And then, of course, there’s the issue of language—the notion that to access somebody just because you can do so. Do they understand what you’re trying to say? Do they accept your visual design? Do they accept your text—the rhetorical structure of your argumentation? How does that come across? So... that’s kind of the first dynamic of access is... what do people have internationally, and how much do we think, do we think design—you mentioned usability earlier—rethinking global usability in terms of access... what folks have access to, what that degree of access is, and how that shapes the way in which we convey information to them.

I think a second component of access we need to consider is... just because we have it, doesn’t mean we’ll use it. And I think you see that is very much the case in terms of access through social media. There’s a perception of “Well, there are 1.4 billion, I believe, users of Facebook worldwide, so if I want to contact the world through social media I’m just going to go to Facebook ’cause it’s the global default.” Well, not exactly... You know, first of all, there are restrictions to Facebook in parts of the world—China’s a good example. And so the question becomes what other methods or technologies of access do we need to be aware of that are used by different cultural groups?... in the case of China, QQ, the instant messaging system... but also a fact of, well, let’s say that a culture has access to the same technology, LinkedIn, the job search social media technology. Does that necessarily mean they’ll use it?... and it turns out that for some cultures, Germany for example, there’s a parallel version of the technology, XING, which is another social media job-search service that is much more widely used in German-speaking nations. So, it’s a matter of understanding that access is a global perspective; it’s a two-way street. And if you wish to use online media to access others... interact with them, you need to understand not only what they can access but what they do use... and what other options are available to them.
to be able to design materials to work across those different platforms… in different cultures.

And I guess this brings me to like a third concept of access, which is language. And in my... just my humble opinion, language is the single greatest restrictor of access globally—particularly for many Americans... monolingualism in English is no longer the default for most places. Yes, you could say that English is the language of the Internet for now... and could be for the foreseeable future, but that means that individuals who do speak English have access to what we have to say, as well as access to what people speaking and writing in other languages have to say as well. And so, therefore, a lack of understanding or use of other languages, particularly by many Americans, greatly restricts the access they have—not just to knowledge and information that’s out there online—but the ability to participate in discussions. If I can’t understand what someone is saying and I can’t speak to them in the language of the exchange, I can’t participate and I can’t benefit from it. So I think… of those three dynamics I mentioned, I think that’s the greatest hurdle for many Americans to have to overcome... is starting to learn more about different languages, to feel comfortable conveying and communicating in different languages. And then to interact globally through online media in those other languages... I think will be the key to success.

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?

To go back to my previous comment, I think social media is going to be the... perhaps the single most significant... sort of body or family of technologies from a global context... for a couple of reasons. The first is we’ve become so accustomed to, with a lot of traditional Web 1.0, if you will, online media—it’s one way… speak at you. Here is what I have to say, and you’re a consumer of it. Social media greatly shifts that model to… it’s speak with. We can have a conversation, we can discuss a concept or an item very quickly in real time and bring in many, many, many parties to interact and to do so... so... there’s also a democratizing effect to it. And that is... because we have relatively uniformal access... uniform access to different social
media, we can more effectively and evenly participate in many exchanges. So, I think for those reasons, social media will become a very important technology globally. Because of the speed of access, the directness of access, the ability to interact more as equal... and the ability to interact as partners. We can talk, speak back and for—excuse me—versus speaking at and waiting for delayed response. Now, there within the fact that social media restricts, in many cases, how much you can say at a given instance—the number of characters, the number of words—means we’ll need to very re... carefully rethink how we interact, because that’ll have some very profound effect on rhetorical structures in these online spaces... and so that I think is going to be a very interesting aspect for research for the future. How is social media being used on global scales? What kinds of new rhetorical structures are emerging that allow individuals to interact through social media in global contexts?... how will the dynamics of this technology shape that rhetorical facet, or will we... we decide as a group... that we want to create new technologies, new social media formats that will allow for greater, more extensive discussion? I think those will be sort of the... really important things to watch for the future—and how they affect the way in which we interact and exchange information on a global scale.

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

I think, perhaps, the greatest skills that many of our programs teach our students are adaptability and the ability to work in teams... for any one of us who’s worked in a different culture in a global environment, the notion that “I’m going to assume everything runs the same way that it does in my native culture”? We pretty much have realized it doesn’t work that way—and you’ve got to be adaptable... to different cultural norms, to different legal norms, to different linguistic norms... to be able to, sort of on very short notice, shift what you have to do, to achieve a given objective and develop a given communication product. And I think the fact that so many of our curricula are designed to teach students to be adaptable in that way will be... perhaps one of the greatest benefits they can bring to the workforce—particularly the
globalized workforce of the future. They can move into an environment and not say “Well, give me the set of instructions on how to perform.” It’s a question of “What do I need to do? What do I need to create? And how do I do it and adapt to achieve those objectives based upon this new environment?” At the same time, working in teams is so crucial in global contexts these days… many of our students will walk into production teams or product development teams… product development teams that are globally distributed… one member of the team works in one culture—another in a different culture. The student who just graduated is from another culture. The ability to work successfully in teams, to know how to ask questions, to adapt to different dynamics… I think is going to be crucial… personally I think the rise of globally distributed teams is going to be very, very prevalent over the next decade, and having students who are taught to be adaptable and to work in teams successfully—to have those skillsets—are what will really help them succeed and excel in the workplace of the future. And I think that’s a universal. It’s not just our students in the United States… but students worldwide. The more students learn to be adaptable and to work in teams, I think the more successful they’ll be globally, just because the nature of the workplace now is shifting to more distributive models—particularly online-based globally distributive models…

You asked about what can we do to sort of enhance the skills that we provide our students with… I think there are four things we could do, or four areas to start moving into; we’ve done some already, but move in more—all connected to a central theme. And that’s to provide students with more exposure to other cultures—particularly American students. And I think that can be done in a tiered structure or an interlocking structure. And I think the first component is to combine it with online education and provide our students with online educational experiences that has them interact with peers in other cultures. Part using online media to partner a class in our culture… in our nation with students in another nation… from another culture. And give them class projects to work on so they can begin to understand how factors of culture and language can affect interaction… and begin to learn through experience, through working together on teams. They expand their understanding of adaptability; they expand their understanding of how to work in teams based upon these experiences—this true exposure to other groups.
And, as follow-up, I think there’s an incentive to push students to do more internationally outside of the class. Encouraging students to do more summer study abroad or regular semester study abroad; to live and work and communicate in different cultures, in different regions, in different nations; to give them that exposure to the everyday... in other cases the actual physical movement might be done. So, how about volunteer experiences or internship experiences? That if they’re not onsite in another culture, maybe they can be online based, where the student works for a... an internship provider or for a volunteer... for a volunteer service provider in a different culture... in a different nation through online media. But, again, begins to get that exposure to “Here’s what it’s like to actually work with individuals from other cultures and other groups.” To learn firsthand how to adapt what they have learned in their classes to this new environment...

A third factor—going back to something I said earlier—is language. I do think we need to push our students more to learn other languages as a part of their educational experience... I think it’s got a threefold benefit to it. The first is the more students learn about other languages and how they work, the more effectively they can work with translators and localizers later on, because they’ve got a better understanding of language and things to keep in mind—or of expectations, rhetorical factors, and things to keep in mind when it comes to visuals or the structuring of information. And I think that can help them be successful employees—particularly in relation to translation and localization... the factor that they do learn another language also means they can participate in international exchanges. “I’m doing research. I need to ask a question.” The question I ask and the answers I receive aren’t going to be limited exclusively to the language I speak. I can draw from a much larger pool and get a much more comprehensive, informed answer based upon the kinds of responses I get through speaking across languages... and I think a third benefit is, once you learn to communicate in another language or learn about another language, you gain a much greater appreciation for the individuals with whom you work for whom English is not their native language—or for whom the language in which you’re interacting or conducting business is not their native language. You begin to understand the challenges it creates, the restrictions it can impose, in terms of “You can’t really say it in this language, so how do I convey that same concept in another
one?” And I think, again, that helps them more... more effectively in globally distributed teams or contexts by understanding and appreciating what others who are communicating in a middle language or an intermediate language or bridge language have to do to exchange ideas and information.

A fourth part—in terms of getting back to how do we expand our current educational models... I would say we go to the user-experience design concept of personas and begin teaching students more about it in terms of “How do you take a persona and expand it to address global audiences?” So, in much of the... what I’ve seen in terms of what usability and user-experience design has taught... we do a very good job of teaching our students how to create personas for different domestic audiences, so the next step in the puzzle is... how do we get them to think and expand to... to global audiences? “I need to develop this information, these materials for an audience of users in ‘Nation X’ or ‘Region Y’ or ‘Culture Z.’ How do I develop personas to do that?” And I think that would be a very easy extension to make—much of the work we do right now in our edu... in our programs... in our educational systems is sort of moving that way...

So to sort of come full circle, it’s providing students with this... this access to other cultures to get them thinking about other cultures through different dynamics that I think can really complement the adaptability and the ability to work in groups and teams that they have right now that will make them very successful in the global workforce of the future.

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

To your first question, I think industry has done a very good job of expanding globally—developing new models, new methods, new approaches to connecting with the greater global environment... In some cases they’re online approaches; in other cases, they’re approaches to developing materials or products for individuals in other cultures, but I think the fact that industry has moved ahead of education quite rapidly
into a much broader global context means that they’ve provided different approaches and models that we might not necessarily want to adopt, but at least consider and think about. What are the benefits? What are the limitations? How can we take the best that is out there and adapt it? How can we modify that which is not effective to what we’re trying to do in education? So, I think those models that industry has provided for working globally can be something we can benefit from.

And this brings, I think, to the second part of your question—working together with industry… It would be a benefit to industry and academia to find out how to partner—to engage in different kinds of programs that allow students to have this sort of exposure to international contexts… excuse me… that would allow them to be very successful after graduation. These could be things like… working together to come up with internship programs that can be done either abroad or online, but allow the student to partner with the sub… the international subsidiary of a local company—or to work with… as an intern on local businesses engaged in global projects to begin to get that sort of understanding. And I think that this kind of collaboration… folks in industry and academia can come up with areas of research—topics of interest around global contexts that are of interest to both parties… that will allow both to work together to shape research questions and talk about things like study design; that can help guide research that is a benefit both to academia and of industry. Again, I think the key is partnering—not either-or but together. How do we work together to benefit from what we do effectively to learn about how to improve that which we don’t do as effectively—but, most importantly, to provide our students with the best and richest possible experiences that will give them the knowledge and the skills base that will help them succeed in life after graduation?

**Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share with the viewers?**

I just want to say thank you folks for this opportunity… and for the chance to do this. I think it’s a great project that you’re working on, and I look forward to other interviews by other folks in the future. Thank you, again.