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art

by Darlene Slack

# of Communicating

Matt Novak believes that explaining the inner workings of a computer, creating product ads, writing and illustrating children's books, and dating all have something in common.

Dating?

"They're all forms of technical communication," says Novak, professor of English and director of Cal Poly's Technical Communication Certificate program.

"In each case, you want to show off the best features and benefits of your 'product,' whether it's the computer you want to sell, the book's moral you want to get across, or your own best attributes you want your date to see."

Novak has been leading the technical communication program since 1989, when he was brought in to revitalize it. Since then, the technical writing profession has exploded, and the program's approximately 120 graduates have reaped the benefits.

"Two-thirds of our graduates are non-English majors, but all who want to work in the field are employed," Novak says. "Most have three to four high-paying job offers before they graduate, and companies such as IBM complain that they can't recruit enough people from our program. Even if they don't want to be technical writers, our graduates are very desirable because employers know they are able to communicate well."

The man behind this successful program may be the quintessential poster boy for technical communication. He started out with a degree in electrical engineering, went on to get a bachelor's and master's in English, and finally a Ph.D. in English with a concentration in technical communication.

Novak's foray into that field began when he worked for an engineering company that had 60 technical "writers." But in fact 59 were strictly engineers; he was the only one with any real training in writing.

True to his belief that almost everything you communicate is technical communication, Novak applies his theories to the writing and illustrating he does for fun — children's books. "I'm telling a story, in a nonintimidating way, about real-life situations, and I want the child to enjoy both the story and the illustrations."

Getting Novak to talk about his children's writing and illustrating takes some prodding. His colleagues didn't know about his award-winning books until about five years ago. It is something, Novak says, that is "personal" and that he does for himself. "It's a way for me to be a kid."

The 20-some books he has created, however, are clearly important to the thousands of children, mostly ages 4 to 8, who have enjoyed the highly entertaining stories, as well as the vivid illustrations that could be dubbed candy for the eyes, which he has created on his computer.

The books impart life lessons in a fun way: there is life when the television is unplugged, people who look different are not so different after all, and it's important to go the extra mile to help someone, to name a few.

This aspect of Novak's life began in the mid-80s when he and his son were drawing one weekend. Together they came up with three stories with drawings. On a whim, Novak sent them off to a publisher. After five rejections, he was on his way as a children's books' author.

Novak does something else that is not widely known: voiceovers for BBC 2, when the network needs a "real" American voice for commercials. This almost-weekly job grew out of a children's call-in show that BBC 2 asked him to host.

When asked what he wants to accomplish at Cal Poly, Novak answers, "I'd like to teach students that learning in and of itself is fun and rewarding, even without the financial advantages that the technical communication program can offer them."

Clearly, that's the core philosophy that this teacher/writer/artist lives by. 



Matt Novak (Photo by Marcia Wright)

# Giving the poorest a chance

by JoAnn Lloyd

**P**sychology and Human Development Professor Patrice Engle moves with ease between the comforts of California and the challenges and joys of developing countries.

Past projects have taken her to Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Peru. Now she is experiencing life in India as UNICEF's chief of child development and nutrition.

Her nearly 30 years as teacher, researcher, and consultant helped prepare her for this daunting position. "After much soul-searching, I decided to give it a try," Engle says. "I was interested because the job dealt with my two loves — nutrition and child development."

What does a day in the life of the chief look like?

"UNICEF's role," she explains, "is to work with government to provide technical support, advice, and funding to improve the lives of poor people. There is tremendous concern for people's rights, particularly those of children.

"This means that UNICEF's programs are intended to combat discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and class," says Engle. "They also attempt to reach the children and women who are the hardest to reach. And UNICEF is committed to community-based actions — those that help people improve themselves and build on their own strengths."

Engle's projects include one that gives poor adolescent girls, who are normally in arranged marriages before 18, a chance to make choices. Another provides support for community-based nutrition programs that locate malnourished children and help their families. Research on the effects of

vitamin A is under way, and Engle is also working with a program that is an Indian version of Head Start, costing about \$20 per child per year, compared to Head Start's approximately \$4,000 per child per year in the United States.

"A major challenge is raising the status of women — the ratio of women to men is dropping, with only 837 women to every 1,000 men in urban areas, due to female infanticide," Engle says.

"Every day there is lots to learn," says Engle. "This is a huge country and an exceedingly complex culture. What I most wish is that every Cal Poly student could have a week or two in one of these villages. It's an incredible learning experience." **CP**

