

# "Computer-Compatible" NCRA Has it Backwards

By Daniel P. Glassman

Help me out, for a minute. What am I missing here? Why is the NCRA only certifying schools that teach computer-compatible theories? Why is the NCRA certifying only computer-compatible theories? What, pray tell, in this picture am I missing?

Let's back up a decade or two when theories abounded that were lean, efficient, easier to learn and....uh...well, loaded with conflicts. These were days when initial T stood for 'it' and 'the' for starters and that's all a non-reporter like me needs to know to grasp the concept of efficient and easy-to-learn vs. cumbersome and complex. Those were also the days when one could reasonably expect to get in and out of school in two years. But, what about all of this wonderful technology that's supposed to have helped make life easier on us?

Well, along came computers that were supposed to make life easier for us and they weren't smart enough to sort out our "problems" (which only became problems because of the technology). The solution was that we made life more difficult for students and reporters in order to accommodate the failures of technology.

There's something terribly incongruous in the picture that's evolved for me in the past couple of years. Keep in mind that for fifteen years I sold passive CAT systems and developed international markets for one of the industry's suppliers of CAT software. Having been in that rut for so long, I too was deluded into thinking that computer compatibility required an accommodation on the part of the reporter because computers couldn't sort out things like misstrokes, conflicts and number variations (What, automatically insert Roman numerals after selecting cap "Volume" correctly from a volume\Volume{#R} conflict to give you 'Volume II' when you write S RO L 2? Really!).

Granted, that age tends to solidify our views and make us less mentally pliable over time, there's no reason why I should suddenly find myself in the new age of enlightenment over something as cast in concrete as this. After all, the NCRA insists on certifying only theories that it determines, in its wisdom, meet the criteria for being sufficiently inefficient as to force students to write everything differently, hence computer-compatible. Schools, under threat of being excluded from the List of Approved Court Reporter Training Programs, jump headlong into teaching inefficient, complex and more difficult theories, because somehow the myth for them has also become their reality.

Somewhere I've heard that out of the mouths of babes come pearls of wisdom or something of the sort. Well, I can assure that I'm not a babe and the days of wisdom are so far back....let's see, when was I last a teenager? But, in the business of writing shorthand, I'm apparently just far enough distant that I still allow myself to ask some dumb questions about the whole process from time to time.

What has brought on this sudden enlightenment however is my move to my own business now marketing a software program that does this stuff that "computers" weren't supposed to be able to do. Mon Dieu, such sacrilege! What is this I hear constantly coming from Eclipse users...."Oh, I just conflict that in." Auchtung! NCRA. People out here are actually *creating* conflicts in their CAT software. Shouldn't Eclipse be de-certified as a CAT product?

Is the failure of the vendors to provide intelligent software the underlying reason so many reporters remain terrified of writing realtime? That's what I've seen in my dealings with users of all sorts of CAT software. Then why is it that Eclipse users are typically way down on the terror-scale about writing realtime? Could it be that they know their software will actually help them write cleanly? That's right, but, isn't that what good CAT software should do?

Well, correct me if I'm wrong (I used to hear that from an old engineering colleague who, as often as not WAS wrong), but, if there really is some software out there that doesn't give a rat's @\$\$....er, I mean, a hoot about conflicts, stacked strokes, the way you write numbers, among a zillion other things that I'm still learning it does, what's up with the thinking of the industry's association? You mean to tell me that it's not computers that are the problem, rather it's the application software? Hmmmmm <scratching my chin> Suddenly, all sorts of "light bulbs" start going on in my old cranium.

If there's some software that actually does that stuff, as it should, maybe the problem isn't with the computers but rather with the software that the industry's vendors (don't you just love that word... "Vendors"... it sounds so, well.... 'vendic') have been peddling all these years. Maybe there's a problem with the developers of the software in that they take the shortcuts, reuse old methodologies to translate, and fail to grasp the nuances of the language issues in which we work. They choose to push the work of transcript production onto you rather than taking the time, implementing the knowledge necessary and coming up with some truly intelligent software that understands the business you're in and does that stuff for you. They're too busy being programmers to understand the translating and editing things that should be in the software they are creating. The bottom line is that they create passive software that is little more than an interface between you and your computer.

In a recent exchange of e-mail with the Quality Control Manager and Director of Development of a certain company who were making claims in a public forum about what Eclipse couldn't do, their comments made it amply clear to me that they didn't understand at all how Eclipse worked, why it worked, or how they could make their software even approach the efficiencies that Eclipse offered. These are people responsible for a big chunk of the software sold out there. A "not-invented-here" (NIH) mentality which refuses to allow them to acknowledge that someone else may actually have an idea that has some merit and might work, the likelihood of them ever making such accommodations on their own, without prodding from the NCRA, is pretty remote.

There's a great line that appears in some publicity documents published by that same certain company that was coined many years ago by Ward Stone Ireland (the father of machine shorthand). It goes something like "To labour less and accomplish more." Strange that today, that same company's representative's response to what Eclipse DOES for its users is to say "Why would you want that software? It will just make you a lazy writer."

Now, here's where I start losing my grasp on reality, I must confess. But, I thought that computers and software were supposed to make our lives easier. So, maybe this industry is made up of a lot of masochists and self-flagellators who sleep on beds of nails and just love beating their way through their transcript production on inefficient, passive/benign software. Most CAT companies, apparently recognizing that, have created the software for it. I think that perhaps the industry owes them a debt of gratitude for supporting the self-abusing habits.

I guess if you're one of those companies that hasn't grasped the concept of creating Active CAT™ software designed to make your lives easier, the spin is that it could make you a "lazy" writer. The reality is that Eclipse is so good at doing the things that CAT software should do, that it simplifies the way you need to write allowing you to be more efficient, think less about nonsense details (word endings and such), and forget about having to write numbers a particular way. What's lazy about that? The word 'efficiency' comes to my mind.

And that brings me back (I usually get back to the point sooner or later) to the matter of the NCRA's half-empty-glass-of-water view of the profession. Should the NCRA not focus its attention and approval ratings for the software products and vendors' development efforts instead of on forcing inefficiency and difficulty on its members? Should the NCRA not demand that vendors, not reporters, make the accommodations necessary in their products to make them Reporter-Compatible™?

Am I that politically naïve to think that the NCRA just has missed the boat on this issue or is that organization so politically intertwined with the vendors that its fundamental operating paradigm wears blinders tighter than a carriage horse's. Do they really buy the vendor position that reporters must make the accommodation to be compatible with their products. Perhaps Captain Smith expected that it was the job of the icebergs to move out of the way of ships as well.

Sometimes people get into a mindset like that which, like a great locomotive, gathers such a head of steam and charges down the tracks with such force that nobody ever stops to say, "Wait a minute. Aren't we doing things backwards here?"

Well, I just fell off the train.