

Writing toward Community Engagement in Honors

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On a late Sunday afternoon in 1934, a park superintendent entered the cage of two black bears that he tended at the park's zoo. His intent was to retrieve a purse dropped by a zoo visitor. The superintendent knew the bears well, having acquired them as cubs and raised them, and he didn't expect any trouble. But trouble was imminent. "ENTERED CAGE TO GET PURSE, ENRAGED MALE CHARGED HIM," the *Mankato Free Press* headline would read the next day (1). The story would go on to describe an unforeseen bear mauling, a series of futile rescue attempts, and an untimely death. Nearly five hundred people would turn out for the superintendent's service that week, congregating at the local Methodist church to mourn a loss felt by both his family and the larger community.

Such was the news story that my Honors English 101 course was handed as we launched into a community-oriented class research project. We had teamed up with the *Mankato Free Press* (circulation 22,000) to develop a story for their glossy magazine, sold at grocery stores in the area and distributed with the newspaper once a month. The personable, energetic editor of the

magazine who had agreed to the university/community collaboration had suggested that the class cover the story, a historical piece commemorating the event's eightieth anniversary.

The collaboration spanned the length of the semester and involved students in various facets of producing a feature article for a local magazine. Students oversaw the project, conducted primary and secondary research, wrote, edited, took photographs, and completed other supporting tasks. They interacted with the magazine editor in the classroom and by email. They also participated in two full-class critiques of the article-in-process. Our collective experience underscores the benefit of honors writing projects done in collaboration with community partners. At the same time, our collaboration makes clear that specific components are necessary in order for such projects to be a success: namely, student ownership and involvement, teacher orchestration, and community-member leadership.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Honors projects that engage the community vary widely. In 2013 and 2014, *Honors in Practice* profiled a number of such projects, including an honors seminar on the Civil Rights movement with a virtual public audience of two hundred; a team-taught environmental psychology course that partnered with a watershed organization to study local environmental problems and educate others; a disaster relief initiative that provided financial assistance to tornado victims; and an experiential capstone option with a community service learning focus (Nix et al.; Dunbar et al.; Yoder; Gustafson and Cureton).

Diverse as they may be, projects like these are often informed by common ideals. At root is the idea that honors students should make significant contributions not just in academic settings but also in personal, professional, and civic environments. Additionally, community-based honors projects have been designed to:

- “[enable the university] to contribute to a broader civic conversation” (Nix et al. 39)
- “[position] honors as an incubator for experimentation and innovation” (Nix et al. 40)
- “increase participation in historically underrepresented majors” (Gustafson and Cureton 56)

- “[situate] students working alongside community members with the purpose of solving a community issue or creating social change” (Dunbar et al. 129)
- “promote a culture of honorable civic engagement on our campuses” (Holman et al. 211).

Our ENG 101H community-oriented project was facilitated by the vitality of the honors program and shaped by the course’s learning goals. The honors program encourages excellence and ambition in teaching; curricular projects taken up by honors faculty are often creative and meaningful. This atmosphere encourages teachers to think of the honors classroom as an “incubator for experimentation and innovation.”

It was the course goals themselves, though, that took the project into the community. Like first-year writing courses at many institutions, ENG 101 at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU) strives to nurture flexible and savvy writers, writers with a chameleon-like ability to adapt to new writing situations. Rhetorical proficiency—the ability to assess a new situation and shape one’s writing to fit its unique constraints—is key, but teaching toward this end can be difficult. Composition scholars have challenged the notion of a single package of skills that, once learned, will enable rhetorical success in each new writing situation (Russell; Wardle). Instead, they suggest that good writing has many faces and, to some extent, must be relearned in each new context. David Russell has used the analogy of “ball-handling instruction” to make this point, likening general instruction in writing to lessons in “general ball using.” In this analogy, Russell argues that attempting to teach general writing skills is akin to “trying to teach people to improve their ping-pong, jacks, volleyball, basketball, field hockey, and so on by attending a course in general ball using” (58). “Such a course,” he states, “would of necessity have a problem of content” (58).

The corollary problem for writing teachers is that writing tasks are situated within a wide range of contexts, each with its own peculiar rhetorical demands. This variety leaves composition teachers with a “problem of content” for first-year writing: what can Composition instructors teach that will prepare students for the varied settings in which they will write?

One pedagogical response has been to focus on teaching students “how to learn to write” in unfamiliar situations rather than simply imparting a set of skills (Bergmann and Zepernick). In a course with this design, a teacher might present students with a series of contrasting writing situations, ask them to adapt their work appropriately, and require them to reflect on their

writerly choices. This approach assumes that as the context changes so do the rules governing writing and that students are best served by a curriculum that helps them better understand the process of learning dynamic sets of rules rather than master a single rulebook itself.

Working within this tradition, I began to imagine a writing curriculum that required students to tailor their writing for audiences within and beyond the academy, thereby exposing them to the demands of contrasting writing situations. Students would write in traditional academic genres but would also try out new public forms. Assigning public writing was not altogether new to me; in previous courses, I had asked students to write for hypothetical public audiences—peers, adversaries, fence-sitters, novices, magazine readerships, and the like—but had found that this approach rarely paid off. Understandably, students found it difficult to ignore the reality of the classroom and teacher and to be invested in a projected audience that, in reality, was not there. Such assignments fell short of cultivating the rhetorical sensitivity I desired.

What I wanted, then, was a genuine public audience. I wanted students to have a greater stake in their writing because they knew people were going to read it, and I wanted them to have to think hard about the background, interests, and values of this living, breathing group. Writing for the monthly *Mankato Magazine*, widely distributed in the community, supplied these lessons and more; students would be able to work in a new genre, learning the norms of content, structure, and style for a feature news story. They would also write for a layered purpose—to secure reader interest, to entertain, to honor the deceased, and to assist with community-building through local history.

Beyond these writing-specific goals, the project supported core competencies embraced by the MSU Honors Program: leadership and research. As part of the honors leadership competency, students are required to strengthen their teamwork skills. As spelled out in the honors rubric (quoted here), students must:

- identify various types of roles within group and team settings
- reflect upon roles within group and team settings
- practice group member skills and abilities to work together toward a common goal
- utilize [their teamwork skills] within campus or community organizations

To fulfill the research competency, they must attain information literacy and synthesis goals (among others). They must learn to:

- access information effectively, efficiently, and critically
- organize others' ideas
- evaluate and synthesize diverse perspectives on a given topic
- draw upon multiple sources to present a coherent and integrated thesis statement or hypothesis

The community-oriented project supported both the leadership and research goals of the honors program and the more immediate goals of English 101.

METHOD

The initial project proposal had students producing single-authored pieces that would be vetted through a competitive peer selection process. The best pieces would be allowed to move on to the editor's desk. The magazine editor suggested a different approach, proposing a group project "that would allow students to work all semester long and in various capacities: interviewing, writing, researching, editing, etc." (Kent). The editor also volunteered the bear-mauling incident as a possible story idea. The collaborative model won out, and the class project began.

The project began during week five of the semester, following an introduction to and practice with essential college writing skills (e.g. rhetorical sensitivity, genre awareness, revision, modes of representing sources). The magazine editor visited our class to pitch the story, supply research leads, describe the magazine, and field questions.

Students were reserved and tentative throughout the editor's presentation; however, the class atmosphere changed once the editor left and students began brainstorming project roles. Because an aim of the project was to encourage student leadership, plausible roles were not identified in advance. Instead, the class generated possible roles and assigned positions to themselves. Ultimately, teams of students conducted archival research at the campus library and at the county historical society, interviewed members of the extended family, served as project managers/editors, and composed a family tree; individual students developed a timeline of the park's history, created a side story, took photos, and focused on layout and design. Notably, a single honors student was assigned the task of writing the feature article; the challenge of multiple authorship was not one we took up.

Meanwhile, I assumed a range of supporting roles: accompanying the team to the historical society, facilitating communication between the editor and the students, distributing research gathered by the teams, assisting the project managers in setting deadlines, and more generally striving to maintain momentum behind the project. The *Mankato Magazine* editor advised students by email on particular facets of the project, such as taking photographs and conducting interviews with family members. He also visited campus three times to assist with the project: he introduced the story (early in fall semester), led a full-class critical review of the second draft of the article (late in fall semester), and attended a pizza party celebrating the article's publication (mid-spring).

The project managers developed a schedule for work completion that helped structure the project. Students were assigned dates on which they would have to report back on their project activities and/or get feedback from the class on a written product. Near the end of the semester, the project managers also attached point values to each project task. Because some responsibilities required a greater investment of time and energy than did others, the class supported a grading system that rewarded students for hard work while not penalizing students who played less significant roles. Thus, maximum point values varied across tasks. Students were able to contest the point values assigned to their role if they believed their portion was unfairly weighted, and some did. In such instances, project managers reviewed their case and determined whether additional points were justified, then passing their recommendation along to me.

DISCUSSION

One of the most satisfying outcomes of the project was the ownership and leadership that the project afforded students. I saw signs of this ownership early on when my otherwise calm class became animated during our initial brainstorming session as students identified roles that would need to be fulfilled for the project to be a success. The student writer's engagement and leadership held strong over the course of the project even though demands were significant and required independent work. Other students had moments in the spotlight when their portion of the project fell due, and most students rose to the occasion. Keeping my controlling impulse in check extended opportunities for decision-making and leadership to students, and they took them.

Equally gratifying were the opportunities I had to learn about an unfamiliar writing genre when, for instance, the editor offered advice to students by email: “Use some of your best material to draw folks in—and then begin laying out the narrative of your story” or “Develop a sense of both [the superintendent] as a person, and his legacy . . . [through] details about [him]. His buffalo jacket, love of animals, eye for landscaping, bringing zoo food home for the family and collecting coal from passing train cars . . .” The editor-led, all-class workshop was instructive as well. Most powerful for me were instances in which his feedback contradicted (and trumped) the recommendations that I would have given, opening the door for second thoughts and “aha” moments.

In a post-semester survey, class members indicated that the teamwork element of the project was a big plus for them:

I thought it was cool how everyone’s part was needed and that we all were able to work together to get it done.

[It] gave us a chance to work together as a big group towards a common goal, and each person had their own part that had to be done in order for the project to be a success.

[I appreciated] see[ing] the finished result [and] . . . what we all accomplished together.

Students also relayed that learning about the process of writing for a magazine was valuable to them. One commented on the benefit of discovering “all the aspects of a magazine article and how many different steps that are needed to produce the finished project” while another enjoyed “[getting] a sense for what being a freelance writer is like.” As a writing teacher, I valued that students were able to see this article broken down into its constituent parts, helping them better understand how individual pieces like primary research or photography contributed to a final product.

The project did have limitations, though. Opportunities for growth in rhetorical knowledge were hindered by the single authorship of the piece. While the contributions that other classmates made to the project were significant, most students lacked opportunities to wrestle with and account for choices pertaining to audience, purpose, context, and style. This absence prevented them from achieving major strides in rhetorical awareness through the project.

One recommendation that students had for the project was to increase levels of involvement for all class members. One student stated, “With more time, it may have been possible to have multiple writers construct different sections of the article and editors to actually do some hands on work editing and rearranging the piece.” Another stated, “If I could change this project, I would try and give each member of the class a significant role. I would also have liked more writing and editing opportunities.” The general sentiment seemed to be that students would have willingly taken on greater responsibility, given the chance to do so.

LESSONS LEARNED

Launching a university-community honors collaboration has alerted me to a number of keys to success that may help others succeed in similar projects:

- 1. Identify a promising collaborator.** The editor with whom we worked had many virtues—enthusiasm, good humor, experience in his trade. One asset that I particularly admired was his willingness to treat the project as a learning endeavor and to support students while they learned. Whether he was providing resources or responding to student emails or offering feedback, the editor took on the educator role. It makes sense that golden community partners would be those interested in and skilled at educating.
- 2. Select an engaging subject matter.** Students were interested in the project in part because of the story they were covering. The story of a fascinating man, his tragic end, and the legacy he left behind drew students in. The takeaway here is that a compelling subject can increase student engagement in a project.
- 3. Rework the teacher role.** In a project like this one, the teacher plays an active behind-the-scenes role. On the first-year level, students benefit less from autonomy than they do from opportunities for choice and accountability. For group projects to work well, teachers need to think carefully about how they might facilitate student activity. Questions to consider: what choices might I give students? What roles and responsibilities might they assume? How will I help them break down the project and manage and track the advancement of the project? Under what circumstances will I step in and exert more control?

- 4. Strengthen the community connection.** Halfway through the project, I discovered that most students had never been to the popular community park where the story took place. We made plans for a class excursion to the site, though inclement weather later foiled the trip. I was reminded that universities can be islands unto themselves, with students knowing little about the communities that surround them. Physical ventures out into the community can help foster a sense of belonging that extends beyond campus boundaries.
- 5. Fend off discouragement.** Initially, I approached a different individual about developing a public writing collaboration; he didn't respond to my inquiry. Eventually, I secured an excellent collaborator, and he provided a great story assignment. In spite of the compelling story, though, student engagement around the project waxed and waned over time. Meanwhile, logistical arrangements ate up my time, and I worried about the class's ability to meet the publication's quality standards. In short, not everything went off without a snag. Stressors were inevitable. It is useful to remember that a project with setbacks can still be successful.

Community-oriented honors projects provide students with learning opportunities that the classroom cannot always provide. Such projects can support the learning objectives of the class and of the honors program more generally. Some of the most promising resources for teaching are closer to home than we might think.

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