

Encouraging Civic Engagement through Extended Community Writing Projects: Re-writing the Curriculum

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Developing community writing projects that effectively benefit students, the community, and the goals of the writing program is a tricky task. Much of the scholarship on community writing projects argue that the thoughtfully constructed service learning project can encourage our students to be more engaged and socially conscious citizens. Increasingly professional writing instructors incorporate service learning or community writing projects [1] into courses with the hopes that while students work to improve a community issue and gain experience with course-related strategies, they begin to see civic engagement as part of their ongoing responsibility. Yet, most often, these projects are discussed in terms of a single course. What has been discussed less is how these projects fit into a larger curriculum to encourage long-term civic engagement that benefits all stakeholders. Balancing civic engagement for students, useful documents for a community, literacy research for students and professors, and sustainability for our programs requires thinking of community writing projects in broader terms than a single course. If we hope to instill in our students a sense of responsibility to be active citizens and advocates for social change—to see the strategies they learn in our courses as useful for enacting change in both their workplaces and their communities, we must show them that their civic engagement can be applied beyond the classroom. Civic engagement, as I see it in a professional writing context, involves working with communities to solve communication problems that the communities themselves identify and giving special attention to advocate for those affected by that communication. Both parts of the definition are equally important but fulfilling both asks a lot of a single project or course.

Sometimes learning and understanding occurs between courses—in the spaces where students

make connections among the work in one class with the work in other classes to form their understanding of literacy, writing, and communication. As a result, we need to consider how our projects in a major or graduate program relate to one another and what they as a whole suggest to our students about their roles as communicators and citizens. Certainly, we as faculty consider what courses should be included in a particular curriculum as well as what goals should be addressed, but often the projects to support those goals are developed in isolation, where individual instructors focus on a specific course and the writing goals of that course, not on how the projects relate to and work with the other courses the students will be taking.[2]

Drawing from recent scholarship and my own challenges with integrating meaningful civic engagement into the professional writing classes at my university, I examine limitations of single course community writing projects for community partners as well as for professional writing students and programs. While the limitations I experienced are from my own courses, the nature of the limitations makes me suspect that they pose challenges in other professional writing programs. Many scholars have added to our understanding of community-based course projects by creating useful pedagogical and theoretical frameworks for courses that encourage civic engagement (Bowdon and Scott, Bickford and Reynolds, Cushman, David and Kienzler, Dubinsky). I want to suggest that to address the limitations of a community writing project in a single course and to encourage long-term civic engagement through professional writing courses, we need a pedagogical and theoretical framework for an entire curriculum. In this essay, I will argue that as we re-think and re-write community writing projects, we explore ways to incorporate **extended** community writing projects—projects that span multiple courses and often require multidisciplinary expertise and a broad sense of critical inquiry to complete—into our **curriculum**. I discuss how such a framework for a professional writing curriculum can encourage students to see civic engagement as part of their ongoing responsibility of providing communication solutions in their communities, not just their workplaces. To demonstrate different approaches extended community writing projects within this framework can take, I offer two examples of collaborations with my own courses—one undergraduate and one graduate course. Finally, I consider what institutional contexts encourage sustainable extended community writing projects.

Service Learning Pedagogy and Civic Engagement

For some time now, scholars in rhetoric and professional writing have argued that service learning courses can engage students to become active citizens (David and Kienzler, Herzberg, Sapp and Crabtree, Schutz and Gere, Scott). For example, Eble and Gaillet (2004) assert that we can encourage our students to become “community intellectuals”—“professionals who participate in rhetorical engagement within their own local communities” through service learning projects and courses that combine rhetoric, ethics, and community engagement (342, 343). They argue that “students who apply what they learn in a classroom to an outside context tend to have richer educational experiences and recognize how they might continue to learn once they leave their current course” (352) and bring about change in their own communities (See also Bowdon (2003) and Grabill (2000)). Scholars such as Johnson (1998), and Sullivan (1990), have argued that service learning projects can enable students to analyze the ethics of a communication situation and encourage students to seek out diverse perspectives and voices on an issue as part of their social responsibility. J. Blake Scott (2004) notes that service learning projects followed by structured reflection about civic responsibility “is meant to help students gain both civic awareness and a long-term desire to serve their communities” (294). Projects that ask students to draw on their abilities to understand complex information, analyze audiences, conduct research to gather information about stakeholders’ perceptions and needs, and apply this information to solve a community problem may encourage them to see that the skills they learn have broader application than just the classroom or workplace. Yet, as Andrew Mara (2006) notes, “[b]ecause technical communication teachers emphasize professional genres (like reports and manuals) and approaches (often professional and user-centered) to distinguish and differentiate their classes from other communication, rhetoric, and composition courses, the turn back toward community can often feel forced” (216). Our challenges for bringing about a sense of civic engagement, then, may be two-fold: 1) integrate community-based projects in a way that help students see the connection between community-based work and the professional writing strategies they are learning and 2) instill in our students the notion that with the strategies and skills they learn in their courses, they have the power to identify communication problems and bring about change beyond the course projects. While I do not doubt that service learning/community writing projects can introduce students to these issues of civic engagement, my early experience with the community projects in individual courses illustrated little evidence that students viewed the projects as an introduction to their long-term civic responsibility as writers and communicators. In addition, single course community writing projects pose limitations for community partners as well as professional writing programs. In the following sections I will address some of these limitations.

Community Writing Projects and Professional Writing Students

Two of the most important curricular challenges facing the graduate and undergraduate programs in technical and scientific communication in my university include helping our students gain as much knowledge as is possible in a broad range of technical and scientific disciplines and helping them better understand their roles as community advocates and as active citizens in community-based communication processes.

In responding to the first challenge, the faculty in my program have always taken seriously Marjorie Davis's argument that "academics [and by extension their students], must extend [their] knowledge base by working directly with colleagues in technical disciplines." Thus, we have traditionally required our students in both programs to take electives in a technical or scientific discipline—18 hours for undergraduates and nine hours as well as an internship for graduate students. To respond to the second challenge, we introduce students to theories about professional writing, literacy, rhetoric, and ethics through community writing projects that will help them understand their advocacy role more clearly. Drawing from the excellent existing scholarship on service learning projects for writing students, we incorporate projects that: ask students to write as their service to the community (Bowdon and Scott, 2003); require students to consider multiple stakeholders in an issue; encourage students to see their work as change not charity (Dubinsky, 2002), and address issues that are important to the participants of the research (Cushman, 1996, 1999, 2002). Yet, despite these approaches, the sense of long term civic engagement was not apparent.

While my course evaluations often reveal that students enjoyed the projects—several have noted that they were more invested in the projects because they were for a real audience, none seem to see the project beyond the scope of the course. The graduate students' internship reports often discussed issues of audience in the documents they created—but never in the sense of advocacy for the users of those documents. Occasionally undergraduate students from past classes brought potentials community writing projects to my attention—usually with the line, "you still 'do' non-profit projects in your classes, right?" But they seemed to see these projects as isolated to a single course—not an actual part of their curriculum—even though other faculty in my program also "do non-profit projects". What seemed to be missing was a way to connect these community writing projects together in a manner that suggested our project choices were intentional—that these projects were chosen because they offered students an opportunity to see how the strategies they were learning as communicators could change not only their workplaces, but also their communities and their own lives. As Blake (2004) notes, "although students are sometimes taught to be citizens of their employers and perhaps the profession, they are too seldom taught to connect their work (and that of their employers) to larger social issues, too seldom pushed to critique the ethical implications of their work on various publics, too seldom encouraged to engage these various publics as audiences and even partners, and too seldom asked to reflect on their noncorporate social responsibilities" (293-294). Our traditional, single-course approach to community-based writing projects may be failing to connect individual projects to a broader and long-term sense of civic engagement.

Community Writing Projects and the Community

Community writing projects in single courses present challenges for the community as well. It is often difficult for individual course projects to fully address the complex communication issues our community partners face. Ellen Cushman (1999) asserts that service learning projects must engage students and faculty to work with the community as active participants to address social issues that *are important to community members*. She argues for service learning projects that incorporate activist research where faculty and students draw on notions of reciprocity and dialogue to make knowledge with participants—knowledge that is "reciprocal" and "mutually beneficial" to all parties and addresses a problem the community itself identifies (332). Ensuring that the projects are reciprocal may also encourage students to consider the community issues at stake, not just the work they are performing for the project. This notion of reciprocity is crucial to the definition of civic engagement and a critical criterion for community writing projects. Yet, this reciprocity brings to light a challenge to community writing projects. Despite working carefully with community partners to create projects that are useful for them, their needs are often more complex than a single project in a single course can address.

Cultivating relationships, especially long term relationships, with community partners is not easy—this is doubly true if your institution does not have a designated service learning center to help faculty locate and connect with community organizations. Some of our relationships with community partners were the result of word of mouth—an alum or a faculty member in another department or program mentioning a need in the community they heard about; some of the relationships were the result of an organization calling the English department to ask if there was anyone who could help with a need they had. For our program, the process of locating

community partners is not systematic, but requires a great deal of discussion between individual faculty members and potential community partners. Over the past several years we each have developed long term relationships with several community partners in our area. These community partners call on us if they have a communication problem they believe we can help them address. Often, these community partners ask us to address what are actually broad issues that do not fit neatly into a goal of a single course. Yet, modifying their need to accommodate our class does not fulfill our definition of civic engagement. For example, the director of the campus geology museum asked my colleague if her class would help him write a grant to secure funds for modifying one display into an interactive learning exhibit. After more discussion, they realized that one display would not really address the museum's immediate need for multiple outreach materials. Yet my colleague's particular class goals could not easily accommodate developing all the materials to meet this need. I was experiencing a similar problem with a community partner who needed to disseminate information about storm water pollution prevention to local citizens via a new website. The expertise needed to develop the website required the research and work of more than one course (and more than one discipline). In the case of both the geology museum and the stormwater website, we began organizing extended community writing projects with faculty from our program as well as other disciplines—where multiple courses would work to 1) better address the community partner's complex needs and 2) better connect the work of technical communicators to civic engagement. Here I do not wish to suggest that accommodating the community partner should be our sole concern in community-based projects. As J. Blake Scott (2004) points out, "[o]ne way service-learning courses (including my own) privilege the vocational is by encouraging students to view their sponsoring organizations as practice clients whose accommodation is their main concern (295)... [u]nless recognized and addressed, this framing of student roles limits their civic engagement by discouraging them from developing more reciprocal relationships with a wider array of community stakeholders" (296). By broadening the stakeholders and issues involved in the projects across courses and sometimes disciplines, we hoped to avoid the kind of limitations Blake acknowledges.

Community Writing Projects and the Professional Writing Program

As scholars before me have noted, sustainable community writing courses require long-term commitment from the faculty and community (Taggart, Cushman). In single course writing projects, faculty often must shoulder the burden of finding, organizing and implementing the project alone. Sustaining that relationship may prove difficult if the community partner does not have similar communication needs in the immediate future that fit within the scope of the specific classes the faculty member teaches. If a faculty member accepts a job elsewhere, their contacts with community partners may be lost. Further, single community writing projects do not suggest a unified, sustained curriculum that reflects civic engagement in students as a goal. Single course project reflect the ideology of the course, not the curriculum. As Taggart (2005) maintains, "integrating service learning and other types of community engagement pedagogies in sustainable ways relies first on conceiving their roles within the curriculum" (99). While many faculty have designed excellent single course writing projects that work toward civic engagement, such courses can only appear as isolated teacher choices in students eyes if projects are not integrated in some way. Drawing from Flower, Cushman (2002) argues that service learning programs that best sustain themselves are ones with committed relationships and ongoing projects, not single projects in one course.

Community writing projects, implemented as individual assignments, often do not reflect a sense of civic responsibility in the curriculum, nor truly address the needs of the community, nor encourage sustainability within a given program. Instead, we must find ways to incorporate community writing projects into our curriculums in significant ways—ways that suggest to our students that civic engagement is part of what they can and should do. Extended community writing projects may be one alternative.

A New Framework for Community Writing Projects in the Professional Writing Curriculum

To meet the needs of students, the community, and the professional writing program, a new framework is needed that can, in part, address some of the limitations of single course community writing project and better encourage long-term civic engagement. The framework builds on existing scholarship for effective community writing projects in single courses, but also seeks to integrate 1) extended projects that encompass multiple courses, 2) multiple disciplines, and 3) complex problems that require critical inquiry into community writing projects.

Extended Community Writing Projects Spanning Multiple Courses

The idea of projects that span courses is not entirely new. In his discussion on students as adult

literacy tutors, Bruce Herzberg (1994) describes “clustering” courses where students were enrolled in a total of three courses (two composition, one sociology) over two semesters to study different perspectives of literacy and serve as adult literacy tutors. David Coogan (2006) also mentions a two-semester project in his argument for incorporating a materialist rhetoric into service learning. David Cooper (2004) and his colleagues in the Service Learning Writing Project at Michigan State University developed a project for general education courses that spanned two semesters. In these two courses, students created a booklet on youth public policy perspectives for Michigan legislators with the goal of changing public policy (Cooper, 31). Cooper discovered during the project that his students were eager and interested in learning when they were performing concrete activities for the project such as lobbying legislators and writing press releases, but “shut down” when he attempted to “connect that public work to canons of civic literacy and the social contract in America” and when he “tried to shore up their felt practices of citizenship with an intellectual network of concepts, ideas, and critical readings” (39). Quoting Levine and Cureton and research conducted at the University of Missouri-Columbia, he notes that “today’s students perform best in a learning situation characterized by ‘direct, concrete experience’, further, ‘they value the practical and the immediate, and the focus of their perception is primarily on the physical world’” (40). Cooper’s findings suggest that the learning styles of our students prevent us from relying on classroom readings and discussions to persuade students of their civic responsibilities. That is, despite attempts to tell our students about their responsibilities as active citizens and user advocates, we must show them through an emphasis on community writing project throughout the entire curriculum if we hope to instill in them a sense of long-term civic engagement and social responsibility.

Multidisciplinary Projects

Professional writers are expected to communicate effectively with subject matter experts, yet often our students do not gain significant experience working with such experts. Further, many community projects require subject matter expertise to adequately address the problem to be solved. Often the problems community partners face are broad, and cannot be solved solely by the abilities of one discipline. In these cases, I believe it benefits both the students and community partners to consider spanning the service learning project across courses. Incorporating multiple disciplines into extended projects allows students to draw on expertise and goals from multiple courses to better fulfill the needs of the community partner. Additionally, projects that involve disciplines outside professional writing can encourage students to build relationships with people in other disciplines and enable both groups to more effectively address broader problems than they would be able to address alone. Beyond the classroom, technical communicators will likely need to collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines, yet our classrooms often do not provide this preparation. Collaborations might include working with students in a course from other disciplines, with faculty in other disciplines, or with subject matter experts in the field. This collaboration can help students see connections between the skills and research practices they are learning and the work of other disciplines—an introduction to working with others in community settings.

Complex Projects Encouraging Critical Inquiry

Community writing projects require students to consider what it means to be literate in a particular context. Yet, as Roger J. H. King (2000) asserts, literacy is “an ambiguous term” (69). In his discussion of how literacy is defined, King maintains that while a “functionally literate” person can “function satisfactorily within a given set of social expectations and needs” (69), “functional literacy does not aim to empower the person to challenge the given social structure or to critically reflect on its moral or political legitimacy” (69)—functional literacy does not bring about change. If one of our goals in community-based writing projects is to provide communications that enable community members to participate in the issues that affect their lives in order to bring about change, we must consider what literacy practices are necessary to perform in a civic forum **and** to bring about a change. Yet, students themselves must be able to critically inquire and reflect on the moral and political contexts of the community situation in order to identify the multiple stakeholders affected, consider the literacy needs and practices of that community, and construct or reconceptualize a change. King argues that it is only through critical inquiry that individuals can reconstruct or reframe a situation. He further asserts that taking certain social issues seriously, such as our environmental predicament, can “provide a useful starting point for critical discussions of the definition of literacy” (68). Drawing from King, I argue that other types of complex community-based problems also can provide a space for the type of critical discussions students need to consider the social, political, and ethical contexts required to solve a community problem and to consider change. Complex problems that are left in their context—not forced to fit the goals and timeframe of a single course—may require the kind of critical inquiry that King advocates—where individuals “problematize inadequate background assumptions and discover more fruitful interpretive ideas” (69). The critical inquiry prompted by

such projects and discussions can encourage students to reframe the communication problem and envision solutions that community partners themselves may not have considered. Complex community communication issues can provide the concrete experience Cooper advocates for encouraging students' best learning situations about civic engagement and critical inquiry. Such projects rarely fit within the scope of a single course.

Indeed, all of the components of this framework require expanding community writing projects beyond the scope of one course and thinking of the projects in terms of the whole professional writing curriculum. In the following sections, I illustrate how the above framework might work through two extended community writing projects. The first project involved environmental science graduate students working with graduate students in my information design course to develop an educational outreach website on storm water pollution prevention for citizens of a nearby county. The second project involved four classes (three of which were undergraduate classes) where each class completed one component of a large museum outreach project: a grant proposal, a website revision, a brochure, and an interactive CD-ROM.

The Storm Water Pollution Prevention Education and Outreach Website

The first example involves a collaboration among a graduate-level information design students, graduate-level environmental science students, a local Office of Environmental Quality, and residents and employees of that nearby county. I became involved in the storm water pollution prevention website project when I was asked to be a faculty advisor for a public service project that a group of environmental science graduate students were conducting.[3] The Institute of Environmental Sciences at my university organizes their first-year graduate students into public service project teams to conduct environmental problem-solving research for a community partner. The team I advised worked with the Office of Environmental Quality (OEQ) in a nearby county to research storm water pollution prevention strategies and to develop a community website about storm water pollution prevention. Both the pollution prevention strategies and the website were required by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as part of their Phase II Requirements initiative. Phase II requirements mandate that municipalities in my state of less than one hundred thousand implement control measures on storm water discharges. The idea behind the websites was to provide communities with information about storm water, why storm water pollution was a problem, and how citizens could help prevent storm water pollution.

While the environmental science students were quite adept at researching storm water best management practices and making research-based recommendations about pollution prevention for Clermont County, they were worried about developing the website itself—believing that professional-level web development was outside their expertise. In order to better address the complete needs of the community partner—and more importantly the citizens using the website, the environmental science students collaborated with students in my information design class—a course that focuses on developing effective print and online communication. In this project, both groups contributed their own expertise to produce a more robust and community-centered website than if one group had attempted the project alone. The environmental science students researched storm water issues and conducted a focus group with Clermont county residents, teachers, and workers to determine which of these issues were important to the community, and what additional issues the community believed would be useful to help them more actively address the pollution. The information design class focused on issues of communication, audience, and web design that were outside the scope of the environmental science students' expertise but equally important to developing an effective civic website. The groups met frequently to share their ideas and solicit feedback from each other on the project. Collaborating with the environmental science students to develop a website that encouraged public participation in storm water pollution prevention offered the information design students the opportunity to work with subject matter experts in another discipline and learn about outreach, website design, and the literacy practices citizens need to use community education websites.

Through focus groups, the students and I found that the citizens' needs differed from the community partner's original vision for the website. Citizens wanted specific information about how they could prevent storm water pollution—such as where to recycle tires and batteries and how to dispose of antifreeze. Citizens also wanted to know how they could become involved in community activities through public meetings and community programs. Much of this information did not appear on the existing storm water pollution prevention websites, so our community partners had not expected their own site to provide this information either. With feedback from the citizens, the students and I discussed and refined the purpose of the website to provide the public with specific strategies for incorporating better storm water practices in their communities that would still fulfill the EPA requirements.

Working together, the environmental science students and the information design students contributed their own expertise to produce an accurate, well-researched, user/citizen-centered

website that neither group would have done as well alone. The project encouraged the students to work together as advocates for the users of the website to increase public participation in storm water pollution prevention. When the students disagreed on information that should be included or the organization of that information, they discovered that thinking about what the users would want made a persuasive argument. The information design class revised and organized the information the environmental science students provided--focusing on issues such as usability, usefulness, and accessibility. For example, they designed the website to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and literally created spaces for announcing public meetings, volunteer opportunities, and other ways for the citizens to become involved in the community. This space was not included in the OEQ's original vision for the website, nor in most of the other existing storm water pollution prevention websites.

For the information design students, the project involved not just website design, but research about the literacy practices citizens employ to make use of civic websites. That is, while we wanted to work with OEQ to develop a usable storm water website, we were also interested in learning how citizens assemble and analyze the information on websites. (This research was part of my own long term work, but an issue I believe students benefit from as well). If, as Cushman (2002) maintains, we need to work with our students in their research, we need to choose projects that support the kinds of research we want to do.

Research for the design students included analyzing the initial feedback from the citizens and critiquing the agency-centered information on existing pollution prevention websites. For example, during classroom discussions, students noted that most of the existing storm water pollution prevention sites they found focused on explaining EPA storm water requirements for townships rather than on specific, concrete activities citizens could use to prevent storm water pollution in their communities or on upcoming public meetings or other involvement opportunities. This lack of public involvement is becoming increasingly problematic for communities whose storm water pollution is causing erosion and polluted streams. The information design students also critiqued the assumptions by the OEQ and the environmental science students about how to categorize and organize the information they had collected for this particular website. A two-hour debate ensued where both the information design students and the environmental science students argued over the wording of categories. For example, they questioned whether citizens would wade through a homepage entitled "Phase II Requirements" in their efforts to find information that more directly related to their involvement with storm water issues. Further, the Design students believed that the original site map the environmental science students provided included categories that were helpful only to subject matter experts, not residents trying to understand how storm water pollution prevention related to the way they disposed of materials such as oil or pet waste, or where they washed their car. It was in these spaces that we were able to discuss issues of user advocacy. Advocacy can be a tricky issue in community writing projects. Asking students to advocate for an agency—even a nonprofit agency—risks asking the student to advocate for an organization that may conflict with their own ideologies. It also suggests that a decision has already been made, rather than an inquiry began. Bickford and Reynolds (2002) acknowledge that while some student may be "very keen on community service but offended at the idea of activism" (229), "they need a broader understanding of activism to see both that they are often activists already, albeit unwittingly, and that they can decide to be activists—that activism consists of acts of dissent in which they can and sometimes do engage. Students need to understand the power and necessity of activism in achieving social change" (238-239). Asking students to advocate for the **users** of the communication seems in line with professional communication. Encouraging students to complicate an issue by questioning who is affected and seeking out multiple stakeholders' perspectives can help them avoid essentializing a situation with a single vision of the way literacies function in the culture and help them understand that envisioning a situation through a single lens doesn't leave space for locating conflicts among groups who have competing views of what writing/communicating should and could accomplish (Simmons, 2007). It can also help prepare students to be better advocates. Ornatowski and Bekins (2004) have questioned the assumption that service learning projects in technical communication courses lead to long-term civic engagement:

There is an assumption here of a relatively unproblematic transfer of skills between the classroom, the community, and the workplace: the community is a kind of transitional halfway house through which technical writers, after doing their time, practically automatically emerge into the workplace as civic-minded rhetoricians... Missing, however, is the link of how, and even whether, they in fact became more ethical or civic-minded rhetoricians. One gets the impression that the students equate 'real life' with 'civic', and equation that is problematic" (255).

Emphasizing community/user advocacy in the community writing projects (and as part of their ongoing responsibility as technical communicators) is one way to discuss with our students the relationship among the classroom project, the community, and the workplace and to interrogate

the nuances of civic-mindedness.

The final structure, design, and categories of the website developed by the student collaboration looks very different from the one initially envisioned by EPA and our community partners at OEQ. However, because the students were able to critically consider the contexts in which the website was needed, they were able to reframe the purpose of the website into a space for citizen involvement where none previously existed or was envisioned. The OEQ adopted in whole the version of the website that the students developed. Figure 1 illustrates the homepage the students created.

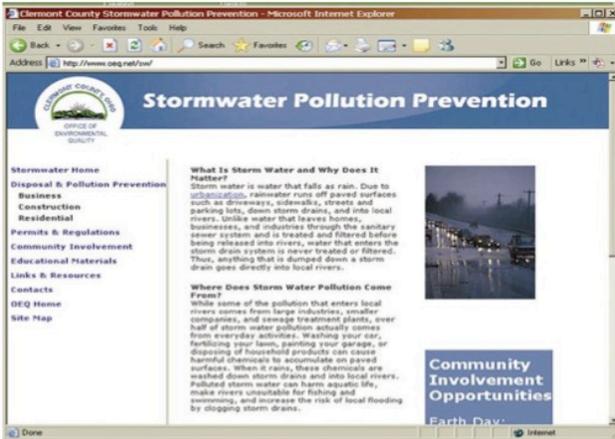


Figure 1: Storm water Pollution Prevention Website, an extended community writing project

Limper Geology Museum Outreach Project

The Limper Geology Museum Outreach Project took a different approach to extended community writing projects. Instead of students from different classes working together to complete a single project, this project asked students from four classes (one graduate class, three undergraduate classes) to complete a project that was a component of a large outreach initiative. Developing a project that drew from both graduate and undergraduate courses was a conscious decision. This arrangement was a way for us as faculty to suggest to the students that civic engagement in projects was not a whim on the part of one professor for one semester, nor something just the undergraduates, or just the graduate students do; it is something that professional communicators do. While the undergraduate and graduate classes differ, they both involved readings and discussions to help students critically evaluate the institution, the audience, and the methods needed to research the community issue. Because the pedagogical approach to both projects was similar, I will focus on the logistical differences of this project.

The museum, which is part of the university's geology department, has several noteworthy displays of fossils, minerals, gems, and meteorites. Four different classes completed projects that reflect the goals of that particular class but that work together to support the overall initiative of a larger outreach project for the museum.[4] For example, students in a graduate-level introduction to technical and scientific communication course wrote a grant proposal asking for funds to revitalize a fossil exhibit. (This class included many of the same students from the information design course who completed the storm water website). Students in an upper-division capstone in technical and scientific communication revised the museum website to further their outreach efforts. Figure 2 illustrates the website. Students in my undergraduate visual rhetoric course designed a brochure to promote the museum and the website. An interactive media studies course (outside our program) was asked to join in to develop a CD-Rom that visitors to the museum can use to learn more about local and global geological issues. In each instance, by drawing on the skills and strategies they learned for that particular course, students wrote to address a communication problem with a community partner and focused on advocating for those affected by that communication. In each course, the students considered not only the context and audience of their immediate project but also of the larger initiative with the museum as they designed each component.

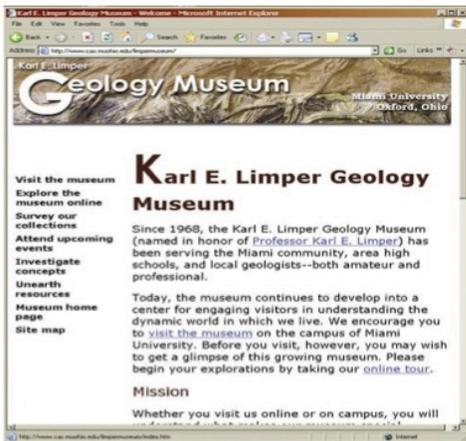


Figure 2: Museum Website: a Component of an Extended Community Writing Project

In the undergraduate visual rhetoric course, the students investigated whether the current geology museum brochure adequately addressed the organization's intended audiences. As with the storm water project, the students conducted types of research typically employed by technical communicators: researching the organization to examine its background, mission, and ideology; interviewing representatives from the organization to determine the organization's purpose and audience; gathering feedback to determine what the organization's targeted audience wanted and needed in the document, and using this information to produce a revised brochure accompanied by a recommendation report that explained the rationale for their revisions. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the brochure the organization adopted. From this project, the students were able to examine issues of community outreach and became quite savvy at considering who was being targeted by a document, who was excluded, why that might be, and how they might be included in the revision. For example, the revised brochure addresses specific programs available for secondary students and teachers—information not included in the original brochure.

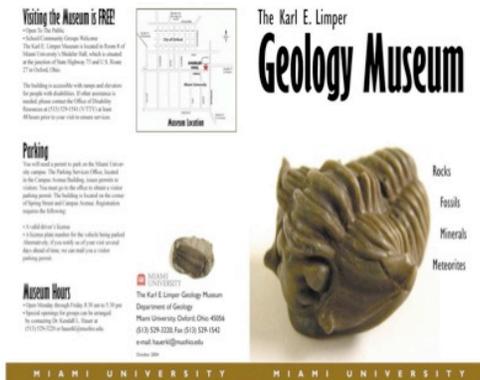


Figure 3. Museum brochure (Cover): a Component of an Extended Community Writing Project



Figure 4. Museum brochure (Inside): a Component of an Extended Community Writing Project

The extended community writing project for the museum aimed at encouraging students to consider not only the varied and complex ways in which technical communicators contribute to community-based projects but also that community work is a regular and expect role for technical communicators.

Together, the stormwater project and the museum outreach project illustrate only two ways that extended community writing projects might be incorporated into the curriculum: two classes from different disciplines working on one complex issue or multiple courses completing stand alone portions of a multidisciplinary larger project. My goal is not to advocate a specific approach, but to offer examples of the types of opportunities we might encounter in our programs to develop a curriculum that emphasizes civic engagement. These extended projects aim to encourage students to see community-based work not as charity but as a space for using the skills they have learned as a technical communicator regarding critical thinking, ethics, and considering the socio-political context of a situation. It is my hope that these extended projects address Blake's (2004) concern that service-learning projects often fail to encourage students to reflect on their noncorporate social responsibilities and often limit "more reciprocal relationships with a wider array of community stakeholders" (296). (See Kimme Hea (2005) for a discussion on using stakeholder theory to encourage students in service-learning projects to consider these issues as well).

An important component of each extended community writing project is time to reflect at the end of the project—to discuss with students how the strategies they applied to their project might apply to other community issues and why it is important for them to be advocates for the individuals who will be affected by their communication—even if their advocacy causes them to disagree with how the organization initially envisioned their documents. For example, when we presented the Storm Water Pollution Prevention website to elected officials of the community, we were asked to revise the section of the website that discussed urban sprawl as a negative impact on storm water. This historically rural county was becoming, in their own words, "developer friendly" and wanted to avoid offending potential developers. Discussing the ethical implications of such a revision, we negotiated to change "urban sprawl" to "urbanization", but to keep the description of how industrial construction can negatively affect storm water and encourage erosion. This negotiation prompted a class discussion on the power and political relations involved in being user advocate for citizens in a complex environmental situation.

While individual students may actually be involved in only a few of these projects during their time in the program, I believe that the way in which the projects are integrated into the curriculum suggests to students that we see civic engagement as an important part of their responsibility as communicators.

Assessing Extended Community Writing Projects

While formal, systematic, and theoretically informed assessment will be necessary to examine

whether the extended community writing projects are effective at encouraging long-term civic engagement, recent anecdotes suggest that these projects may be at least a step toward that goal. (See Taggart for approaches for assessing sustainable service learning courses).

A year after they completed the extended community writing projects, four graduate students involved in both projects selected internships (which they find on their own) that included community outreach as their major project. When each of them asked me to be a reference for the internship (and later to chair or serve on their internship committees), each asked if I would talk about the storm water project because, as one student said, “that whole research project seems so closely aligned with what I will be doing.”

In an internship progress report, one of these students mentioned that she helped reshape her department’s vision of outreach based on what she learned about outreach and community advocacy in the Technical and Scientific Communication courses she completed. (Later, in an evaluation, her internship supervisor mentioned her ability to rethink their current outreach approach as a key strength.) These indicators do not individually suggest that the projects have brought about an effective change, nor that these students will use their knowledge of community advocacy outside of their workplaces, yet, I can say that since implementing the extended community projects, the students themselves are bringing up issues of community advocacy and civic engagement in the classroom and internships much more often than before.

The extended community writing projects have created a stronger relationship with our community partners. The community partners with the storm water project noted that the collaboration between the environmental science students and the information design students resulted in an outreach website that provided even more useful and accessible information for citizens than they had anticipated. (The IES faculty have called the project a “landmark collaboration” between the disciplines). The community partners have since asked us to develop three more civic websites. The long-term relationship has allowed for some conversations with the community partners that might not have been possible with an isolated project where our involvement ended at the close of the semester. Most obvious, perhaps, is that I have a better understanding of the organization, the community, and the socio political contexts surrounding both. This understanding can help bring to the forefront political issues surrounding the seemingly mundane materials we are given to work with. For example, over a year after the class and I completed the storm water website, the community partner’s IT staff changed the font size from relative to absolute during an update. This change prevented individuals with low vision from increasing the text size with the browsers. Because I still work with this community partner, I began a conversation with them about the importance of allowing users to change the font size to fit their needs. This conversation has helped me to clarify to students in future classes the importance of explaining their design decisions to the community partner.

In the case of the geology project, it was only by critically examining the whole, complex communication problem at hand and considering how different courses might address components of the larger issue, were we able to truly meet the community partner’s needs. Involving more than one course—or even more than one discipline when appropriate—draws on expertise and goals from multiple courses to better address the needs of the community partner. With extended community writing projects, we can offer community partners multiple solutions to multiple communication problems. Working with the same community partners over time enables us to identify other communication opportunities that can help community partners achieve their goals beyond the problem we might have been called on to address and better discuss the organization with students.

Making the development of community writing projects a collaborative endeavor among multiple faculty members can provide more sustainable service learning in a program than when faculty must locate, organize, and orchestrate every community writing project by themselves every semester—a process that can lead to burnout in even the most firm believer in community based projects. This is especially true in universities where service is not valued nearly as much as a publishing. Working with other faculty to find and design community writing projects can help establish a base of long term community partners and projects and ease the never ending search for community partners and projects in universities that do not have a service learning center. For example, based on the OEQ’s experience with the storm water project, the supervisor worked with my colleague’s class to prepare a proposal for greening the community and my undergraduate visual rhetoric class to develop a recycling website. Working as a faculty team rather than an individual can also help us maintain an active dialogue about what pedagogical practices work best to encourage civic engagement.

Revising Community Writing Course(s) to Better Encourage Civic Engagement: Connecting Civic Engagement to the Curriculum

While the institutional conditions in my program, university, and community encouraged—even created a need for—extended community writing projects, I believe similar projects can be adapted in many writing programs. The projects, however, are not without challenges.

Planning

Meetings with program faculty to discuss course and curriculum goals and projects that can support those goals are essential before commitments to community partners are made. While it is not necessary for all faculty to participate in these projects, participation from enough faculty to maintain several projects a year will be essential to sustaining a curriculum that emphasizes civic engagement. Faculty must do extensive planning, well in advance of the start date of the project, to determine a good match between the community partners' needs and our course goals. We also must work with our colleagues to make sure that they are committed to planning their courses and working with the community partner in subsequent (or concurrent) semesters. We must continually make connections with community partners and faculty inside and outside the program. All of this takes time. In my experiences with extended community writing projects, I've found that planning each project takes significantly longer than the single course projects because of the multiple parties involved in the project---the community partners, multiple faculty, and multiple classes. (Though, in my experience, the projects themselves do not necessarily take more **in-class time** than single community writing projects). Frequent meetings are required with the community partner and all potential faculty before any part of the project begins to ensure that everyone understands their role and that this role is mutually beneficial for all parties. Meetings must continue throughout the project to ensure that goals have not changed. As with single community writing projects, meetings and ongoing communication between the community partner and students is essential for a successful project. Meetings with all parties at the end of the project are useful for discovering what was successful, what was not, and potential reasons why. Eventually, these meetings can contribute to a list of best practices.

Community partners have their own schedules, collaborating faculty have their own schedules and these do not always mesh with our syllabi. It then becomes our responsibility to coordinate the students' expectations, our pedagogical goals, and our community partners' desires for an effective outcome. Because of class scheduling—certain courses are only offered once a year--it may take a year or longer to complete the entire project for a community partner. The storm water project took a year; the geology museum outreach project took a year and a half. See Figure 5 for a timeline of the geology museum outreach project.

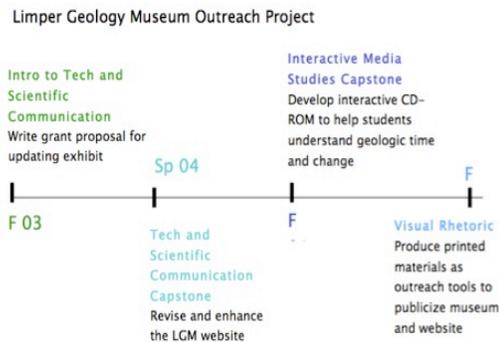


Figure 5: Geology Museum Outreach Project Timeline

There are other challenges of community writing projects that this new framework brings to light, but does not solve. One of the goals of my design classes is to give students experience using industry standard design software such as InDesign, yet our community partners do not always have access to this software for the updates they will undoubtedly need to make to the documents we create. If the community partners cannot update the documents, the documents will be of little use addressing their long-term communication issues. Yet, this dilemma opens a

space for talking to students about how even their production choices affect the community partners and subsequently the community, and for discussing the institutional and ethical implications of seemingly mundane decisions.

Choosing Extended Community Writing Projects

Extended community writing projects should meet certain criteria. The deliverables should draw from the goals and strategies of the course (asking students to write to address the community partner's communication issue). Engaging in the kind of work the students might be involved in within their own communities and workplaces can help them see how they can apply the strategies beyond the classroom. Including these projects in courses on a regular basis may encourage students to see this work as part of their curriculum, as part of their skill set. Enabling students to see how different courses can address different aspects of the same large issue may help them make connections among the strategies they learn in their many classes. The community partner's communication issue should be one of interest to the faculty and their research agendas. Engaged faculty who are able to combine teaching, service, and research will help contribute to a more sustainable program.

Certainly, institutional context contributed to the success of these projects. Some of the elements that fell into place to help these projects succeed may not be available at all institutions or may not be something that can be systematically planned. For example, because of my research interests, I already had a relationship with my university's Institute of Environmental Sciences—which offered the opportunity for the storm water project. Similarly, I work with other faculty already involved in service learning/community writing projects who were interested in collaborating. Perhaps even more importantly, these faculty and I share an institutional purpose—to encourage our students to see themselves as capable community advocates.

While community writing projects are most often thought of in terms of a single course, single course projects present limitations for students, community partners, and programs. If we want our students to see civic engagement as part of their responsibility as effective communicators, we must reflect that in our curriculums. A framework for extended community writing projects allow us that opportunity.

Notes

[1] In this essay I make little distinction in how I use the terms “service learning projects” and “community writing projects”. In my own classes, I use the term “community writing project” to encourage students to see their work as social change rather than charity.

[2] Here I am not suggesting that faculty be denied the freedom and creativity of developing their own projects that fit the goals of their course. Rather, I'm suggesting that faculty discuss the projects they are considering for their courses and reflect on whether a community problem might well be addressed by multiple courses while still furthering the goals of each individual course. An example of this approach is addressed later in the article.

[3] I discuss this storm water pollution prevention website project as an example of a participatory design framework in *Participation and Power: Civic Discourse in Environmental Policy*, 2007, SUNY Press.

[4] I am grateful to my colleague Jean Lutz for inviting me to participate in this extended community writing project and for discussing implications of such projects with me.

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