

Jumping the Connection Gap: Helping Students Build a Bridge between Major and Career

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As expressed by Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters in the introduction to *Writing the Community*, “external barriers tend to get reproduced internally” on a college campus. Though opportunities to join in community events increases, so does the diversification—and ultimately, the division—of those communities into smaller and smaller sub-groups. “Plugged-in” and dangling white cords (the ever-present information umbilical), students are often in groups, but just as often, they do not interact. In my specific role as a professor of English literature, I find that this isolato image often makes up the core of my students’ perception of the “great writer.” Of course, in reality, even canonized giants—from the romantic poets to the tortured (and at times torturing) post-modernists—were surrounded by complex networks of peers and patrons. The “artist” must ultimately answer the needs of audience and purpose—just as any technical writer. But though we live in a diverse and literate society, surrounded (it seems) by a constant buzz of messages, the isolationist perspective remains cogent. The problems of this perspective are various, but one that affects a majority of my students—traditional and non-traditional alike—is this: how do I translate these (supposedly)

isolationist skills of reading and writing into viable work-place skills? Or, to put it more generally, *what am I supposed to do with this English Major?*

Isolationism among adolescents, the lack of understanding of the world outside themselves, has been called the *connection gap*. Explored fairly extensively by scholars of psychology and anthropology, the term is used to describe the cocoon-like structure of modern living, the fact that we are “losing touch” with other human beings. But works like Laura Pappano’s *The Connection Gap: Why Americans Feel so Alone*, or Anneli Rugus’ *Party of One: The Loners’ Manifesto* deal mainly with social isolation, the gaps between individuals. For my students, the connection gap is between their identity as college students and their future identity as successfully employed persons, working at jobs they enjoy and which are relevant to the skills they have learned. They often have difficulty perceiving the business community as *their* community; they feel as though their skill set leaves them unprepared to make contact with that world. This produces anxiety in my youngest students, those who have had little job experience and who are incredibly nervous about speaking to those in “real world” jobs. However, another kind of anxiety presents itself to my non-traditional students, those who have returned to school after working in other careers often feel tremendous pressure to “make something” of this degree, to find gainful employment that validates their return to school and their choice of the English major, respectively. Thus, I have had the young advisees in my office, emotionally explaining the pressure put on them by parents who worry there won’t be jobs for them post-graduation, and the elder student, too, asking for help in forging a career: “Should I teach? Is that all there is?”

With our greater networking capabilities, it *should* be easy to expand students' horizons and foster mutually beneficial relationships that would serve them not only in their present community, but in their futures as professionals. Increasingly, however, the only places student may go for answers are (often over-burdened) career centers or technical writing classrooms—not necessarily English courses *per se*, but those that are designed to teach students the practical value of communication. To provide a better platform for students and to support the efforts of my own university's career services, I spent three semesters (spring and fall 2011, spring 2012) developing a praxis. The first iteration of this was a pilot course, a 300-level titled *Romancing the Marketplace: Why Degrees in English and the Liberal Arts Matter in the Today's Economic Climate*. This course was later developed into a fully enrolled 200-level English class for our "Writing in Communities" program. In the following, I will detail the structure of the class, its assignments, and the successes of those who completed it.

At the outset, I had considered various service-learning course structures. Generally, service-learning is identified as "a cross-disciplinary program of pedagogy and service, rather than as a method of teaching multiple skills" (Kassner, Crooks and Watters 2). Such projects tend to be non-profit in nature—volunteer work or other community service that help to build bonds with the world outside university.¹ I ultimately chose a different approach, though one which borrows from certain service-learning components. Rather than combining community service with instruction and reflection, I decided to have my students contact local businesses and develop their identities as career-persons—while retaining the instruction-application-reflection model. Developed originally through assessment of student needs, the course forged new connections with community leaders while helping to build an expanding social network for

the students. Through continual “spot-checks” of reflection and class presentation, the students were able to see 1) businesses from an insider perspective and 2) themselves from a business perspective. As in successful service learning projects, this course allowed the students to understand the practical application of their studies, while enlarging their sense of community. The students worked in teams, in and out of the classroom, relying upon one another for mutual reassurance, recognition and support. The experience began closing connection gaps, and we all learned more about the power and place of writing—and of writers.

The Pilot: Romancing the Marketplace

In the fall of 2010, I posted the following course description:

There is one question above others which tends to haunt and plague the English major: what are you going to *do* with your degree? Fortunately, there are answers (and jobs) waiting for those who successfully complete their liberal arts education. *Critical reading, analytical thinking, and clear, effective writing*—the hallmarks of the English degree—are also three major keys to success outside academics. In the current job market, seekers must demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to ‘think outside the box.’ This class intends to hone and emphasize the skills students already possess, while teaching them not only *why* but *how* their English degrees can make them effective competitors in this climate of global economic change.

As a pilot, the class was quite small. Nonetheless, the students who signed up were a diverse group; two “non-traditional” students returning to college and six “traditional” students in their early twenties. The class had an equal number of men and women, all of whom were juniors or

seniors in the program. Among these students, the primary concern was universal: what am I going to *do* with my degree? After a brief survey, I found that most expected to be teachers of some kind, primarily because they could think of few other options. Several indicated that they would like to be professional or creative writers, but thought the idea impractical and untenable. Other suggested that maybe they could “edit or something.” Through this process, three things became universally apparent to me: 1) students did not know what opportunities were available to them; 2) students did not understand what skills they already possessed, and 3) students did not know how to apply their aptitudes in non-academic settings. As juniors and seniors of English literature and language, they were already critical readers, analytical thinkers, and effective writers. In addition, they had unique sub-sets of skills; one outgoing student possessed excellent interpersonal skills. He was what Malcolm Gladwell (author of *The Tipping Point*) might refer to as a “salesman,” someone who is persuasive not just with words, but with “subtle, [...] hidden and [...] unspoken” social cues (80). Another of my students had remarkable memorization skills, and yet another tremendous energy and an eye for detail. These are powerful combinations and would be well respected in any business community—and yet, the students felt at a loss, unprepared and ineffective. The goals for the pilot were to make these skills as apparent to the students as they were to me.

I intended to develop a curriculum that would meet my student’s needs while allowing room for their own participation in the course structure. To start, I created a set of learning objectives; the course would help students articulate and translate their unique skill set into a confident—and employable—professional persona. To accomplish this, we would focus on the rhetorical skills necessary to “romance” the market, analyzing current sources and local/global

situations for aspects of logos, ethos, and pathos. Students were required to complete the following tasks:

- Research a number of professional fields, becoming familiar with trade journals and other publications—often acting as the “editor” and investigating the parameters of publication success.
- Conduct interviews with members of the academic and business community, both to gain confidence and to practice conversational skills and social networking.
- Practice articulating their skill set to various audiences, not as resumes, but as narratives of success and progress. This was accomplished partly through the writing of a professional “biography”—something which should supplement (though not replace) activity in the technical writing course.
- Strengthen their ability to translate academic and disciplinary skills into the language of business and utility. The value of a web presence was also discussed as a medium for translation, and students analyzed other professional and business websites, commercials and advertisements for rhetorical strategies.
- Complete a research project that explores their present field of interest, which brought the several sections of the course together.

The texts I chose for the pilot course were Charles Wheelan’s *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*, Daniel Pink’s *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers will Rule the Future*, and Tim Lemire’s *I’m an English Major—Now What?* The students were also required to find similar texts to Lemire’s and to deliver weekly presentations in which they reviewed what the

book could offer graduating English majors. By the end of the course, therefore, we had a comprehensive annotated bibliography that could be given to other students. This alone did not really answer the purposes of the course; again, their critical engagement with texts had never been in question. To help the students see the progression from major to career, I also developed a series of assignments which built on their skills and culminated in the networking assignment—the practical component that asked them to contact business leaders.

In the first weeks of class, I asked the students to write a reflection paper in which they considered themselves from a business standpoint. That is, what about them did students consider marketable? How did they understand themselves in the wider world outside of academics? The parameters of the assignment read as follows:

1. Introduce yourself.

In a few lines, give us a short punchy summary of who you are. Be professional, but be “real.” Think about the first lines of an application letter: “My name is Stanley Gibbons, and I have always been a driven, enthusiastic and cheerful person. I enjoy working with people, and I have been in several bands/clubs/organizations...etc.”

2. Tell us your goals.

What is it that you hope to do in life? Where are you headed? If you aren’t sure—no problem. Tell us what you most enjoy doing, and what you could see yourself doing for a long time.

3. Tell us your experience.

In a narrative form, tell us a little bit about what you already have done. This could be work experience, but it might also be volunteer work, clubs and activities, or even an

interesting hobby. Anything that relates to your goals or your possible future work is welcome.

This assignment would be repeated at the end of the year, becoming part of their final portfolio—but would be revised and informed by what they had learned throughout the semester. A second assignment asked them to analyze the Wheelan and Pink texts critically. For all but one of the students, Wheelan’s *Naked Economics* was their first introduction not only to economics, but to social or *human capital*. Human capital may include things like education, raw talent, creative thinking, and both natural and acquired skills. It is, at its essence, a *potential* value. What a person has to offer to other people or to the market generally makes up their human capital, and to the extent we cultivate and appreciate these talents, we *invest* in human capital. Wheelan explains that a college education “is reckoned to yield about a 10 percent return on investment;” to put that in perspective, it means that whatever you pay for in tuition, you can expect to “earn that money back plus about 10 percent” a year in higher earnings (128). Daniel Pink alternately discusses a person’s ability to think creatively, a right-brain-centric approach to problem solving. He also puts a great deal of emphasis on determination, which is, in Pink’s estimation, a key to the success of any human capital investment. This is excellent news for students—something that my pilot class took to heart. What could they do with their English degree? Plenty. Mostly because human capital is linked “inextricably” to productivity, or “the efficiency with which we convert inputs into outputs” (135). The mere fact that the students quickly perceived the application of human capital (in the text) to their situation (in the class) and critically engaged with how this might affect their future endeavors is proof that they are “productive.” They efficiently turned the input of the class into an output they could use.

According to Wheelan, human capital “creates opportunities,” that enable us to “live better while working less” (147). This is, of course, related to the concept of incentives—our motivation for working hard is often so that we don’t have to work hard in the future.

The third assignment built on these new perceptions and had two distinct parts. Students were first required to choose a profession to investigate, being clear about what it was, where it was, and what it did. They needed to research the profession and its field in books, journals, and websites. When they felt reasonably certain of the job’s basic criteria, they were to find and reproduce a job description and its requirements (either from online job sites or from newspapers). They were to pay specific attention to what a resume would need to include in order to achieve the entry-level position. Part one of the assignment was to include a glossary of terms as well, including “buzz” words specific to the job or field. Part two of the assignment was a set of step-by-step instructions explaining how a junior-level student might attain the necessary skills to achieve the job (including any necessary internships).

These assignments were buttressed by class lectures and seminar discussions in which we talked about issues of translation. We analyzed the language of job descriptions, getting familiar with the new terms and discussing what these terms really meant. We then looked at the skills students already possessed and analyzed them in similar fashion. How might we transform “good at reading big books alone in my room” into a recognizable job skill? A fast reader—a critical reader? Someone who has good work ethic and is a self-starter? A person unafraid of large tasks (or big books)? Soon, the students were able to make connections between what job ads requested and what they already possessed. At mid-term time, we celebrated this new ability by playing a game: Wheel of Translation. Student teams competed to create profiles and then to

match job skill to position. All of this prepared them for the critical next step—imagining themselves as applicants. Assignment 4 asked the students to write a persuasive job letter in answer to the job ads they had chosen.

A word here about those jobs: I had asked the students to look for jobs they found fascinating, not jobs they “figured they could get.” Some of the students still pursued education careers, but many did not. One discovered copywriting and advertising. Another investigated editing at a major publishing house. One looked at community service leadership among under-served ESL populations. In writing persuasive job letters to the same applications, the students were forced to see themselves in new ways—and because they had already discovered what kinds of skills were required, they also understood which of their skills needed shoring up. And, as this assignment was business or technical writing, they were also writing in a new way.

Business writing, as an aspect of technical communication, has a practical purpose and clear aims. In “Living the Rhetoric: Service Learning and Increased Value of Social Responsibility,” Mary Hutchinson remarks that business writers “have a natural tendency to engage with the community” (428). However, the business community itself is “depicted as consisting of large, for-profit organizations whose focus is often on the bottom line” (Ibid). Some of my students had attached relatively negative connotations, therefore, to the business community—and some even feared it to an extent. It is possible that we, as educators, rhetoricians and even as business leaders, occasionally draw lines between business and community that unnecessarily replicate divisiveness. In constructing the course’s social networking assignment, therefore, I wanted the students to consider the businesses as groups of individual people—not as conglomerates. They needed to overcome the “us-and-them” thinking

that they began the course with, seeing the business community as a place they, too, could be happy working in. The result was the last assignment of the semester, *Exploring communication and networking*.

The assignment began with a brief introduction to the general aims and scope:

Networking assignment (Group)

This assignment requires leg work. We will talk more about this in class, but you will be seeking out members of the local business community and asking to interview managers, owners, etc. about what kinds of things are expected of stellar employees. This will serve a second purpose in helping you hone networking skills. We will practice role playing prior to this assignment.

It was followed by a prompt and some sample questions that I wished each group to ask independently of who they chose to interview. One of the key components, however—building once again on the persuasive assignment—was the initial letter of request. The students needed to contact the employers on their own, “cold-calling” and, through appropriate use of professionalism, asking for interviews.

Prompt

Each group will need to contact and speak with three different people at three different organizations. This is a networking assignment, where you are trying to establish the role of networking and communication to different industries.

1. *What skills are most valued in the company?*
2. *In what ways does communication figure in the company (what kinds of communication goes on—what sort of documents, etc.)?*

3. *How does this business view social networks?*
4. *Are there additional places or persons that would be good to know about if pursuing this industry?*

Each team was then responsible for developing additional questions that addressed key concerns of our texts. For instance, in Wheelan's *Naked Economics*, we read about why incentives matter—and I asked students to craft questions that reflected the concerns we discussed in class.

The two points above, I admit, seem at first glance to suffer from exactly what Hutchinsin warns about: the for-profit ideology is rife with selfish motives that benefit only the individual and not the community. But of course, all motivation is mixed with self-interest. We discussed the potential irony of this in class in order to show how incentives can create positive community behaviors. For instance, I want to help the environment, but I also like discounts at the supermarket. When the local co-op started giving five-cent discounts to those who brought their own bags, the two impulses were equally indulged, and a relationship (between me and the local co-op) was forged. That is the essential point of Wheelan's text as a whole, and to a lesser degree that of Pink's and even of Malcolm Gladwell's (whose text I incorporated more fully the next semester). The students' projects reinforced this concept.

In the course of their interviews, they found the business leaders engaging and engaged, excited to be part of a class project and enthusiastic to speak about their own vision of what made employees desirable. In the reflection that followed their interview, one group of students noted crossovers between course concepts and active job skills:

[The employer] favors job candidates who have enthusiastic and positive attitudes, finding these two qualities essential to a business. Other important

qualities [...] were having critical thinking and persuasive skills. In the job interview, the candidate must convince the employer of the following: “I am a hard worker who is dedicated to perform my tasks with integrity and respect.”

(student group 1, blinded)

Another student, who interviewed a manager at a local bank, wrote that “persuasive speaking also serves the members of an organization. [...] employees try to persuade their customers that this account or mortgage or fund is right for them, so customer satisfaction and revenue increases. Thus, [the bank manager] expects his employees to be as persuasive as possible”

(student group 1, blinded). Students also saw the value of critical reasoning and clear articulation: “[the business leaders] extolled clear speech, stressing the need for an articulate voice in appropriate situations. As Liberal Arts majors, we too prize clear, effective speech and now know that professionals, such as lawyers and bankers, do also” (student group 1, blinded).

During the last week of the semester, students were asked to rewrite their original “professional” narratives. They translated this first written assignment into a short video project, a kind of snapshot of their professional identity for use on websites or jobsites. It was a celebration of how far they had come throughout the semester, and final reflection memos further clarified their newfound confidence. One student wrote “As an English major who has experienced the judgmental stereotypes to my major that I will never succeed, I am happy [to show] that I can truly work wherever I want. I have my own goals of course, but I know that I will be a very desirable employee because of my degree” (Mari). The students had begun to see themselves as part of this community, and—as a demonstrable result—one of them applied to and received an internship from a business leader after the course had ended. The same student is

now actively seeking a position as a copywriter while applying for graduate school. One of the elder students decided to continue his focus on teaching, though he altered his original goals in favor of becoming a college English teacher. He is now in the second year of his master's degree. The pilot had proven—even before arriving at the final assessment—a successful way of building bridges over connection gaps. Additionally, students began to understand their potential human capital and how to translate their skills from the classroom to the boardroom.

The pilot class was a success, but the course would not be offered again in its original form. Instead, I developed the pilot into a 200-level writing intensive English course, part of a cluster called *Writing in Communities*. I chose to use this class platform in part because the class is taught every year and also so that I would have multiple opportunities to test and adapt the pilot course components. There were several key differences, however. For one, the students were freshman and sophomores, and while there was still a high proportion of English majors, there were also non-English majors and undeclared students. This was actually a benefit, in my eyes, as the additional perspectives meant additional breadth for our discussions. The texts changed slightly as well. In addition to Wheelan's *Naked Economics* and Pink's *Whole New Mind*, I added William Pfeiffer's *Pocket Guide to Technical Communication*, Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, and Pink's *Adventures of Johnny Bunko*, which is a manga comic detailing the exploits of a young man entering business for the first time. The technical writing guide doubles as a grammar handbook of common errors (a useful addition, for though it is a writing-intensive class, it may not necessarily be filled by English or writing majors). Gladwell provides additional points of interest, including a look at cultural differences in human capital. In addition to helping students connect with the local community, the revised class discussed the difference

between local and global economies—and the kinds of skills needed for each. In terms of assignments, I made an adjustment to the networking assignment that reflected what my first class had learned: that is, the focus is not on communication as it exists in the business apart from the community, but how businesses use varieties of communication practices to connect *to* the community—from charity donations to food drives to coats for kids.

Another variation, however, and one which is still bearing fruit, is the addition of a *second* interview. The university's trustees generously volunteered to be interviewed as well, and so the students connected with high-level administrators, trustees and business leaders—some of whom lived in distant states. This addition returned us to practical uses of technology's reach; one group of students conducted a video interview from a connected classroom to someone on the west coast. Other groups conducted group phone interviews, which led to productive in-class conversations on the benefits and limitations of technology. *It is so much better*, several students remarked, *to have face-to-face conversations whenever possible*. Technology had been, through the course of the semester, returned to its place as a *tool* for communication, not as a replacement for it.

Outcomes

Throughout these semesters, I was encouraged by student discussions. Many readily admitted that this course provided them with a tool kit they hoped to employ in their other endeavors. In addition to the networking assignment, students researched potential career paths and fields of expertise, meaning that they ended with a better understanding of their own potential, of ways in which their human capital might enrich not only themselves but also the wider community. The final video presentations were inventive (one was a reenactment, Saturday Night Live style, of

the “motivational speaker”; another involved role-playing and still another a life-sized Rosetta Stone of skill translation) and enthusiastically aimed to reach a broad audience. However, it was in the reflection memos that growth was most visible. In these short letters, students explained the relevance of the social networking model and expressed a keen desire to do more outreach. “The assignment gave us real-life business experience,” explained one group. “We not only learned the values of communication skills, enthusiasm, writing and speaking skills, and professionalism [...] [We learned] to come prepared, to improvise, and to conduct ourselves professionally to hold up our credibility as [...] students and as future denizens of the workplace” (Hannah, et al). Another group claimed that “This course has been one of the most enlightening classes any of us have ever taken. Not only has this course exposed us to current economic issues and the importance of communication, but it has also connected us to our local business community by establishing personal relationships” (Gloweczewski, et al).

Interestingly, I received similar notes from the business community leaders and from the trustees. Most volunteered their services into the future (and are presently on the interview list for my 2013 course). Their enthusiasm and generosity—and the students’ excitement and appreciation—returns me to the idea of incentives and of service learning. Though there are perhaps no specifically or directly monetary gains in a collaboration of this kind, the incentives (and the “payoffs”) are incredible and abundant. Forging relationships with this for-profit community of business leaders (as well as the non-profit administrators and trustees) recalls the symbiosis I suggested in the beginning of the paper. In the past year, I have discovered that three more students from the course gained internships and that one Biology student became a double major in English because of the benefits she saw to her future professional life. When students

see writing, critical thinking, and communication at work in the business community; when business leaders see excitement and engagement on the part of students; and when both join together for mutual benefit and support, we have what service learning has always aimed to provide: a greater understanding of societal issues and civic engagement conducted through community education and communal endeavor. As I continue to tweak this course, I am encouraged by the warm reception it has received, and I hope at last to leave the twin spectres—that of “the lone writer” and that of the “unemployed English major”—well behind.

Notes

[1] A colleague of mine, Dr. Andrea Wood, has successfully employed service learning in her women's and gender courses. She describes this work in "Feminism, Service Learning, and the Borderless Composition Classroom," *On Campus with Women* 38.3, Winter 2010.

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