

***Just Have to Look Harder:
When the Values of Service-Learning Projects are not Readily Apparent***

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As students, when we discuss service-learning projects, we mostly hear success stories. Academic and technical journals alike feature reports from instructors and professors who expound the values of service learning through examples of successful projects. These themes then carry over into the classroom where students who read these stories expect the projects they complete to have the same clear results. In actuality, service-learning projects can present a number of unanticipated challenges. Some of these circumstances can even affect the overall outcome of the project, rendering it unsuccessful (or at least unsatisfying) in the eyes of the students. However, we find that from a student's perspective, projects that lack clear, clean-cut results still allow for valuable learning opportunities and real-world experience.

In our experience, Technical Communications, by nature, lends itself to a service-learning based curriculum. At the undergraduate level, the study of technical communication focuses heavily on the skills necessary for a practitioner position within the field. And while a classroom setting provides the foundations for these skills, providing a context in which to apply them – such as a service-learning project – allows students to engage not only with the project material, but also the community they are serving. Because of this, a service-learning based curriculum that heavily involves community partners working with classes to provide real-world, hands-on experience is paramount to a worthwhile technical communications education.

Our personal experience comes from a Technical Communication program focused heavily (indeed, almost exclusively) on service-learning projects. In two years, we completed no less than seven service-learning projects for local non-profit organizations. For the most part, we believe that a large number of these projects ended in success for our community partners and our classes.

For example, in the fall of 2012, we drafted a user guide for an electronic citation tool currently in use in the university library. We then conducted a peer-driven tutorial to educate graduate students on the mechanics and features of the program in order to manage references for their senior theses. The benefits of the project stood quite clear: users of the guide reported being able to find, manage, and include citations with relative ease. And from our perspective, we saw a project through its development phase to completion, all while getting feedback from the end users.

In the spring of 2013, our class teamed up with an aluminum milling plant in Spokane, Washington. That project saw the class divide into teams to draft maintenance procedures for some of the equipment at the mill. Towards the end of the term, the mill's equipment-maintenance manager reviewed each team's products for submission and consideration by the plant manager.

At the end of each of these terms, both classes felt they experienced success in creating a usable, tangible document for an outside partner, the exemplification of a successful service-learning project.

In the winter of 2014, we found that some service-learning projects don't end in ideal outcomes. As part of a proposal-writing class, we were assigned to write a funding proposal for a

local branch of a national non-profit organization. The tasks consisted of researching the organization's needs and mission statement, identifying potential funding sources, and deciding on the most effective way to write a funding proposal. Unfortunately, our experiences *writing* the proposal and working with our community partner proved more challenging than the process would lead one to think.

In the beginning, the proposal-writing process had few issues. We met with the CEO of the local chapter of the organization and discussed the mission, goals, and future plans of the organization. Because the organization focused mainly on creating opportunities for affordable housing, we knew two very important details right away. First, our top funding choices were foundations with missions to help urban development. Second, we would need to draft the proposal to connect the non-profit organization's mission with the foundations' missions in a way that brought attention to the need for housing development in the affected area. Once we established these parameters, we began the research process to identify promising foundations. Our research turned up favorable results, including a Bill and Melinda Gates-backed foundation that focuses on community and urban development.

At this point, the project took an unpredicted turn. Part of our proposal-writing process included providing an itemized list of materials needed to build one of the organization's homes. Usually, we could secure this type of list with an e-mail or phone call. In this case, though, our community partner failed to return any communications despite numerous attempts to gather this information as well as multiple instances where the client agreed to send information, but did not follow through. When we did finally hear back from our community partner, we were dismissed (almost offhand) and told to contact the organization's intern with any future requests for information. This ended up effectively severing any direct contact we had with the organization and hindered our efforts to write an accurate, effective proposal.

By the end of the quarter, the class felt disgruntled, frustrated, and a little upset. We had not located a request for a proposal from the foundation to which we wanted to apply, and we still faced communication difficulties with our community partner. As a class, we could not understand why an organization, which initially approached us for help with this project, would suddenly ignore all our communications so close to the project deadline. During class discussions, we attempted to determine the possible reasons for why we had not received feedback. Most of our classmates believed that our organization had better things to do than deal with an undergrad class. Then to further exacerbate the situation, we found out that our community partner backed out of attending our final proposal presentations. Finding out that our client could not provide direct feedback or even a "yes" or "no" answer made the last months of researching, writing, and editing the proposal seem almost pointless. We questioned whether or not our client would use our proposals at all.

Although this scenario was new to us, a little research proved that we were not in a unique situation. Scholarly literature outlining projects that did not turn out as planned proved easy to find. Many of these stories involved non-profit community partners. Robert McEachern, assistant professor of English at Southern Connecticut University, makes the argument that a seemingly unproductive service-learning project is not necessarily the fault of the non-profit organization itself, but rather the nature of non-profit management theory. He brings up five points as to why many service-learning projects with non-profits go awry: passion for mission, chief executive assuming too many responsibilities, atmosphere of scarcity, individuals having mixed skill levels, and the participation of volunteers (McEachern 2001, 217). In examining our own experience, we found that some of McEachern's points directly align with the difficulties

we faced while working with a non-profit organization. The most pertinent parallel we noticed falls under the area of the chief executive assuming too many responsibilities. The executive in charge of our community partner has only seven full-time staff members that oversee operations for a city of roughly 300,000 people. In all fairness, six multi-student groups asking one person for detailed information probably taxed the organization's resources. Another parallel we saw resembles what McEachern describes as "an atmosphere of scarcity." We discovered early on in the project that our community partner's timeline for the project did not coincide with our own: namely, that we needed more time than it could afford to give. This scarcity of time made it difficult for our group to gather the information needed to complete the proposal by the end of the ten-week academic quarter. After reading this, we started to understand our own situation a little better. Neither our class nor the organization had done anything wrong; we realized that non-profits have a lot of obstacles to overcome, and devoting time to other needs is one of them.

Needless to say, the experience of writing a funding proposal for our community partner left a bad taste in our mouths for some time. However, after an extended period of reflection, we began seeing value in the project as an example of how business in the professional world is not perfect and can malfunction. We also gained clear, tangible professional writing skills while constructing the proposal. We got first-hand experience researching in a national foundation database, we learned how to develop rhetorical strategies that can connect a foundation and a non-profit organization, and we learned how to adapt a proposal to changing and sometimes unfavorable circumstances. But equally impressive were the lessons we learned that were neither immediately evident nor tangible: the latent values. In short, we learned that real-world results rarely come out like the clean-cut results we see in the classroom. We also came to the conclusion that all parties in future service-learning projects would do well to remember: academic student learning has the luxury of being structured, but this structure rarely occurs in the real world, especially with non-profit organizations. As for our community partners, we would want them to know that students appreciate feedback on completed work, regardless of whether or not it will actually see use.

Sometimes, the real world does not play by the rules of the classroom. Colleges plan out classes and curricula months ahead of time and provide the safety net of a skilled instructor should any hard questions arise. The professional world rarely gets this luxury. Agendas can and do change at a minute's notice, organizations can be chronically short-staffed, and sometimes program directors do not have the information needed to complete projects to their fullest potential. These lessons, while hard-learned, end up as some of the most important "real-world" experiences students can get.

Being able to see the benefits of a "real world" situation has since helped us with other service-learning projects. There is now an understanding that a project might not go according to plan and that we can adapt to new situations. We still expect communication with our clients, but we now understand that, especially for non-profits, there are many factors that play into a client's ability to communicate. This exemplifies how service-learning projects can provide students much more than just an application of theory. This experience is something that students can bring to future employment. Service-learning projects offer students the opportunity to start on the proverbial "three to five years of work experience" while they are still in school, further preparing them to answer the common interview question, "Can you explain a time where you had to overcome a problem?," something that the security of a more structured class might not be able to provide.

We don't know whether or not our community partner will ever use the proposal we provided, let alone if it will get funded. Adam Wolfe, a liaison between our class and our community partner, informed us two terms later that our community partner appreciated our efforts and believed that it "now had seven very good starts for proposals and a new range of funding opportunities" (Wolfe 2014). What we do know is this: valuable lessons do not always come just from successful projects. Just because a project looks like it failed initially, it does not necessarily mean that it failed completely as a real-world learning opportunity. Stories of successful projects are good at showcasing students' abilities to flourish in ideal situations, but projects like our own teach students how to adapt to changing – and sometimes less-than-ideal – situations.

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