



Service Learning in Technical Communication

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Service Learning

Introduction

Service learning is a pedagogy that combines the principles of experiential learning with service to the community. According to Matthews and Zimmerman (1999), service learning is a form of experiential learning meeting four criteria provided by the National Community Service Act (1990):

- Students must learn as they participate in service that meets an actual community need
- Service and academics must be integrated by reflection
- Students must have the opportunity to use new skills in real situations in their own community
- The class must cultivate in the students a sense of caring for others

Dubinsky (2002) described service learning as combining these three axes: “learning (establishing clearly defined academic goals), serving (applying what one learns for the communal/societal benefit), and reflecting (thoughtful engagement about the service learning work’s value)” (p. 64). In short, service learning is “learning-by-doing for others” (Dubinsky, 2002, p. 64).

As evidenced by myriad articles published in technical communication journals, it is clear that scholars in our field recognized the significance and importance of service learning. For example, Henson and Sutliff (1998) argued that service learning projects are well suited to advanced courses in business and technical communication, and that such a collaborative-writing approach will enhance students’ potential for ethical learning. Matthews and Zimmerman (1999) further advocated for redefining or expanding the definition of technical communication to include a service learning and civic component. Similarly, Eble & Gaillet (2004) posited that instructors should redesign technical and professional communication programs so that they can prepare students to become community intellectuals who are ethical and civic. Dubinsky (2002) suggested that service learning should be mandatory for all professional communication curricula so that we can assist our students in becoming “ideal orators who meet their citizenship responsibilities” (p. 64).

Advantages/Benefits

Community partners (e.g., non-profit organizations and small businesses) benefit from service learning by receiving assistance with projects that are important to their operations, in addition to gaining access to intellectual resources of the academic community. Universities and colleges will be able to enrich their curriculum and learning opportunities by providing relevant changes in line with the expectations of the society and furnishing ample opportunity for growth in its learning environments. Thus, they not only foster the creation of civic-minded and engaged students, but also develop community ties and gain reputations of commitment to service.

In terms of the benefits of service learning projects for technical communication students, advocates such as Sapp and Crabtree (2002) argued that integrating service learning projects into technical communication courses allow students to practice and apply the skills they learn in their introductory or advanced courses. For instance, skills in document design, instruction writing, ethics, proposal writing and technical editing can be used in a variety of social, political, and small business contexts in students’ communities. Students will not only experience technical communication challenges firsthand, they will

also better understand social and educational problems. Likewise, since students can provide deliverable products such as brochures, instructions, and PowerPoint presentations, without being physically present at the service partner's organization/workplace, Kelly (2012) suggested that online professional writing courses would be ideal for service learning projects.

Soria and Weiner's (2013) mixed-methods experimental study shows that service learning projects in distance education technical writing courses not only enabled students to connect to the "real world," (e.g., future employment, writing for their audiences), but also helped them develop deep learning with their course materials. This is confirmed by Cargille Cook's (2014) examination of multiple case studies at different universities, where she found that service learning projects in technical communication programs do indeed support students in honing their research and communication skills.

Approaches to Service Learning

This section provides an overview of various approaches to implementing service learning, such as partnerships with clients and assignments/models (for both online and traditional classrooms). A list of recommended reading is included for further information.

Partnerships with clients/service partners

A successful partnership is critical to a positive service learning experience. There are three main approaches to identifying clients/service partners: collaborating with an organization that the instructor has experience with, letting students find their own service partners, or having both students and instructors locating organizations/clients together:

- Scott (2008) suggested that we can better facilitate students' learning by becoming more involved with and establishing long-term partnerships with organizations (2008). Though it can be challenging to demonstrate how to effectively collaborate and communicate with service partners and users, we can at least share our knowledge of the organization, e.g., "its interpersonal relationships, political tensions, communication patterns, and other dynamics" (Scott, 2008, p. 405) with our students. This approach was modeled by Bouelle (2014) in her online technical communication classroom by partnering her students with a non-profit organization that she has experience with.
- Matthews and Zimmerman (1997) recommended that students choose organizations with which they are already familiar with or which they have already worked. Henson and Sutliff (1998) maintained that it is more beneficial for students to identify their own service partners because they will "...gain valuable experience in self-promotion and in the realities of the workplace when obligated to approach client agencies and establish relationships with them" (p. 195). Similarly, Nielsen's (2016) argued that requiring students to find their own service opportunities would make them "more responsible for their education and increases citizenship practices" (p. 237).
- Youngblood and Mackiewicz (2013) developed a database called Service Learning Opportunities in Technical Communication (SLOT-C) Database, which allows instructors and students to locate organizations/partners that will meet course requirements as well as their own interests/expertise.

Assignments/Models

Scholars in our field have identified various models or assignments in implementing service learning in technical communication. In particular, Bowdon and Scott's (2003) *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication* provides useful suggestions on how to choose, refine, execute, assess,

evaluate and present the service learning project, along with tips on managing collaborations. Other examples are as follows:

- Mara (2006) offered charette as a productive way for students to engage with a community-design problem and to actually collaborate with the community stakeholders to develop usable documents.
- Turnley (2007) argued that critical reflection on technology (i.e., their client's uses of and access to technologies) is necessary in service learning projects, as this allows students to "articulate careful connections between their client's context and larger cultural frameworks" (p. 120).
- Scott (2008) merged service learning and user-centered design in his introductory technical writing course, where his students collaborated with a community-supported organization to produce recruitment, orientation, and training texts.
- Walsh's (2010) study of four service learning projects implemented in technical communication classrooms found that wiki pedagogy improved student and client collaboration.
- Brizee (2015) contended that using Isocrates as a model for collaborative knowledge-building allows instructors to "move students away from counterproductive perceptions of rhetoric, technology, and civic engagement and position them closer to a collaborative model of working with stakeholders and working with our polis" (p. 159).

In recent years, service learning has also been implemented in online technical communication courses. For example, these scholars offered the following practical suggestions:

- Bourelle (2014) emphasized the need of incorporating live cast programs like WebMeeting (offered by Blackboard) or Spreecast to facilitate communication between students and their service partners, in addition to having asynchronous chats after video conferences to ensure that all parties are informed.
- Nielsen (2016) encouraged her students to locate their own agencies (e.g., "e-service," projects that can be entirely online). In addition to the documents her students produce for their agencies and reflection, she also required them to write progress reports, which reminded students of the instructor's expectations and allowed them to practice the progress report genre.

Assessment/reflection

Reflection has been commonly used as a form of assessment in service learning projects because it is a process of examining and measuring what students have learned through service learning experiences (Huckin, 1997; Scott, 2004). More importantly, reflection allows students to not only contemplate on their actions and how they could improve their efforts, but it also helps them "gain both civic awareness and a long term desire to serve their communities" (Scott, 2004, p. 296). As Sapp and Crabtree (2002) pointed out, "...the importance of a meaningful reflection process can not be overemphasized" (p. 426).

Challenges

This section addresses the common challenges that students and non-profit organizations experience when collaborating for service learning projects, including the constraints in online courses.

Students

Although service learning is an effective method in engaging students, Matthews and Zimmerman (1999) identified several challenges that technical communication students faced in their service learning efforts:

- Separating technical communication and service learning: Students do not see the benefits of integrating service learning and technical communication. They think of them as two separate

entities and the integration means extra work for them. Therefore, they are not enthusiastic about the project and thus are not able to develop civic values or improve their skills.

- Seeing service learning as a charity: Students are defining their experiences as volunteer work or charity, rather than as academic work providing them with reciprocal relationships. They are not aware of the fact that they too, are learners, instead of “sole givers” in the service situation.
- Struggling with their roles in an unclear non-academic setting: This happens when students are not comfortable with their “observatory” role (instead of participatory one) in the organization they work with. Students might face the challenges of “socially orienting” their writing to match the voice of the organization they work with.
- Experiencing conflict as a team: This is a common problem that can occur in any collaborative setting.
- Denying the rhetorical nature of technical documents: Some of the non-profit organizations that the students work with might not be aware of the rhetorical nature of documents. For instance, for organizations that desperately need help, they might not always hold the students accountable for professional technical documents. On the other hand, they could also judge a student’s work (e.g., grant proposals) by the results (funding) they get.

Nonprofit Organizations

In McEachern’s (2001) research on non-profit organizations, he listed five common characteristics of such organizations:

- Passion for mission: Organizations are usually driven by some type of social mission.
- Chief Executive wears too many hats: Staff get paid very little to do a lot of work.
- Atmosphere of scarcity: They have too little time and money.
- Individuals have mixed skill levels: They are lacking skills in writing, computer and management.
- Active participation of volunteers: They create an atmosphere of instability in organization due to the varied hours and sporadic participation.

These characteristics suggest that even though non-profit organizations usually work for a great cause, they might not have the most flexible/responsive personnel or organized/planned structure that are necessary to ensure the success of a service learning project.

Walton (2007), who interviewed executive directors and volunteers from ten small, non-profit organizations, found in her study that they are most in need of documentation that will (1) enable stakeholders to better perform tasks, (2) that communicates the organization’s expectations of stakeholders, and (3) that can be sent to external reviewers to prove the effectiveness or accountability of the organization. However, development is not considered a priority because they “may not believe that documentation development supports the organization’s mission” (p. 21).

Walton’s study confirmed Matthews and Zimmerman’s (1999) findings, which emphasized the importance of educating community organizations about the role of technical communicators. They suggested that instructors should clearly establish each party’s role and expectations, as well as explain the new learning environment and the method of evaluation. The criteria and definition of a successful report or document also needs to be discussed and articulated with the students and with the non-profit organization.

Constraints in Online Courses

Some of the common problems that may arise from implementing service learning in online technical communication courses include:

- solving communication problems between the service partner and students, where students want more interactions from the director (Bouelle, 2014), and
- locating service opportunities (in potentially isolated areas) that align with the students' interests/values, and engaging non-traditional students (e.g., with accessibility constraints) or part-time students (Nielsen, 2016).

Recommended Reading

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