



Writing with Habitat Homeowners in an Online, Professional Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

This research offers a framework for how instructors can incorporate community-based writing projects into online, asynchronous classes to 1) meet student learning objectives in a professional writing course and 2) meet a nonprofit's communication goals. To assess how the project and framework met both the students' learning objectives and the community partner's communication goals, anonymous, voluntary surveys were administered to both parties. The framework in this study provides a model for how faculty can incorporate reciprocal community partnerships into online, asynchronous writing courses.

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When students partake in service-learning projects they can receive a myriad of benefits including increased academic learning, increased civic learning and commitment to their communities, significant gains in social skills, increased intercultural competency, and personal and professional growth (Astin et al., 2000; Butin, 2003; Eyler et al., 2001; Yorio & Feifei, 2012). Furthermore, service-learning is considered a “high-impact practice,” and educational research indicates that such practices can increase the rates of student retention and engagement (Kuh, 2008). Additionally, if a course project is closely aligned with the community partner’s goals, the community partner receives a usable document, product, or service, in addition to the opportunity to mentor students and develop a relationship with the university. Service-learning can also deliver immediate assistance with needed labor and resources to the nonprofit sector, allowing organizations to complete tasks that otherwise might have never been completed, which can produce short-term economic and social benefits (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Professional writing courses have been early adopters of service-learning, given that professional writing courses aim to equip students with practical skills for communicating in the workplace. Professional writing courses can occur through in-person or online modalities, but the number of university courses taught online has increased substantially over the last three years. The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) found that in 2020, 75% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one distance education course, and 44% of all undergraduate students only took distance education courses. Furthermore, the number of undergraduate students who were enrolled in at least one online course was 97% higher in 2020 than in fall 2019, and the number of undergraduate students who were only enrolled in distance education courses was 186% higher in 2020 than in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Although much of this increase in online courses was due to the pandemic, online learning continues to remain in high demand in academia, and many instructors are still searching for ways to increase student learning and add meaningful service-learning components to online courses. Throughout this study, I answer the following research questions: 1) How has a new community-based learning project in an asynchronous, online professional writing class met the student learning objectives? 2) How has a new community-based learning project in an asynchronous, online professional writing course met the nonprofit’s communication goals?

In the following sections, I first present a brief literature review that examines existing research about community-based learning in online and face-to-face professional writing courses. Next, I offer a framework for teaching a new community-based learning project in an online professional writing course. Finally, I discuss

responses from an anonymous survey I administered to students and the community partner to assess if this new project successfully met the student learning objectives and the nonprofit’s communication goals. The framework and project assessment presented here can be utilized by faculty who want to add rich community-based learning components to their online courses while simultaneously fostering meaningful, reciprocal relationships with nonprofits.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

FROM SERVICE-LEARNING TO COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING

One of the goals of many professional writing courses is to equip students with applied theories and skills for writing and communicating in the workplace, which makes service-learning or community-based learning a natural fit for these courses. Service-learning, described by Jacoby (2014) as “a form of experiential education” (p. 1–2), involves students completing community-based projects for course credit while deepening their learning through repeated cycles of action and reflection. According to Dubinsky (2002), including a hyphen between “service” and “learning” (service-learning) indicates that the university and community partner are engaging in a mutually reciprocal relationship, rather than a unidirectional model that positions the university as “the giver” with resources who delivers a charitable service to the community. As the field evolved, many scholars dropped the term “service-learning” altogether in exchange for a term that eliminated these notions of “service,” resulting in “community-based learning.” Unlike the charity-oriented model of service-learning, community-based learning “refers to a wide variety of instructional methods and programs that educators use to connect what is being taught in schools to their surrounding communities, including local institutions, history, cultural heritage, and natural environments” (Abbott, 2014, par. 1). While there is some overlap within the two definitions, scholars have realized that the language we use to frame our engagements impacts how we approach these interactions, and many have moved away from “service-learning” and toward the less hierarchical “community-based learning” (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Shah, 2020; Vincent et al., 2021). Throughout this article, I will be referring to our class project as “community-based learning” rather than “service-learning,” since I framed our partnership as being mutually beneficial rather than charity-oriented.

COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING IN THE PROFESSIONAL WRITING COURSE

Ever since Huckin’s (1997) seminal article about the pedagogical and humanitarian benefits of using

community-based learning in the technical writing classroom, additional research has indicated that community-based learning increases students' sense of civic responsibility (Bourelle, 2014; Eyler et al., 1997; Nielsen, 2016; Sapp & Crabtree, 2002; Scott et al., 2006; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Furthermore, because of the "audience-driven nature of their work," professional writing students can benefit from the valuable pedagogical approach of community-based learning for courses teaching workplace preparedness, since "not even the best-written case study or end-of-textbook-chapter-exercise can duplicate the rhetorical complexity that comes from a real human reader trying to solve a problem using a real document" (McEachern, 2001, p. 211).

Additionally, pairing professional writing students with community partners creates opportunities where "students can put theory into practice and gain valuable job-related experience, and businesses can help train and recruit future employees while having certain projects completed inexpensively" (McEachern, 2001, p. 211). Building on this concept and translating it to the online course, Soria and Weiner (2013) found that "service learning in online technical writing courses helps students to make connections to the 'real world,' encourages students to connect with their audience(s) and develop a sense of purpose for writing tasks, connects students to future employment, and develops deep learning with course materials" (p. 189-190). Community-based learning also increases students' critical thinking skills and abilities to collaborate with multicultural partners (Dubinsky, 2002). Participating in such projects teaches students how to integrate theory and practice by collaborating with community partners in mutually beneficial ways, ultimately preparing them for professional roles and civic life (Dubinsky, 2002).

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING IN THE ONLINE PROFESSIONAL WRITING COURSE

A foundational concept of community-based learning is reciprocity, an approach to partnerships that ensures that the university and community partners are both receiving something of value from the partnership while also learning from and teaching one another (Dostilio et al., 2012; Kendall, 1990). Face-to-face courses that use community-engaged pedagogies may be better positioned to develop reciprocal relationships with a community partner, since the instructor and students can meet the partner in person, visit the community partner's physical site, and potentially develop deeper relationships. However, students who take online courses may live across the country or across the world, and it may be impossible to require that students visit their community collaborators in person. While the field of technical and professional writing has been discussing best practices for community-based learning in face-to-

face classrooms, we are still developing best practices for creating reciprocal partnerships in online, asynchronous professional and technical writing courses (Bourelle, 2014).

In response, Bourelle (2014) offers a framework for integrating community-based learning into the online technical communication classroom, outlining an approach wherein the instructor picks the community partner and then identifies the project's writing and engagement goals through Thomas Deans' (2000) lenses of writing *for* the community, writing *about* the community, and writing *with* the community. In writing *about* the community, students spend time volunteering at local organizations and reflect on their experiences through writing (Deans, 2000). In writing *for* the community, students produce written documents (often promotional and marketing-style materials) and partner with organizations in a client-like model (Deans, 2000). When writing *with* the community, students and community members collaboratively research, write, and co-create texts together (Deans, 2000). Dubinsky (2002) and Bourelle (2014) both stress the civic value of students writing *with* the community, arguing that this approach can lead to a deeper relationship with the community partner, which can result in students developing a "better sense of understanding of others and the contexts in which they live. Then, because they develop these relationships they begin to *care* about the community and seek to improve it" (Dubinsky, 2002, p. 64).

However, what is missing from the existing literature is a framework for how students in online writing courses can write with the actual recipients of a nonprofit's services. For example, Bourelle (2014) argues that students wrote *with* the community because they collaborated with the director and staff of the nonprofit, but the students did not write with the recipients of the nonprofit's services. This approach of collaborating with the nonprofit's staff tends to be the focus of many "writing *with* the community" projects, but relying on the staff of nonprofits to be students' primary points of contact and knowledge can easily burn out the staff and end the community partnership. For example, Blouin and Perry (2009) identified several factors of unsuccessful community-based learning partnerships, including poorly prepared students, a lack of professionalism among the students, and "investments of resources that do not yield tangible returns for the organization" (p. 126). However, if students can do work that meets crucial needs within the organization, the partnership is more likely to be reciprocal (Dostilio et al., 2012).

Additionally, as Shah (2018) found, very little research considers community-based learning partnerships "*from the perspective of community members*" (p. 83), and no frameworks for incorporating community-based learning in online courses offer models where students are writing with the nonprofit's *recipients*, rather than just

with the staff. The following sections build on existing literature about community-based learning frameworks and use Dostilio et al.'s (2012) notion of reciprocity to present a framework for how students can write and edit collaborative documents with a nonprofit's *recipients* to simultaneously meet both a nonprofit's communication goals and the student learning objectives of a professional writing course.

MEASURING STUDENT LEARNING

Redd (2003) conducted a study that compared student, teacher, and client assessments of the outcomes of a community-based learning project in a face-to-face technical writing course, identifying "significant discrepancies in the teacher and client assessments" (p. 15). Building on Redd's (2003) study, I used a publicly available resource, the Missouri State Citizenship and Service-Learning Center's (CASL) Service-Learning Survey, to administer a questionnaire to students and the community partner involved in our course project. My own institution does not have a service-learning center or community-based learning assessment tools, so I borrowed the survey of a comparable public 4-year state institution that is also located in the Great Plains. To assess how a new assignment genre (the profile article) met student learning objectives (SLOs), I modified several questions to specifically address the SLOs of our professional writing curriculum. This research (IRB-11489) was determined to be exempt from further IRB review by my university.

OVERVIEW OF A 7-YEAR, ONGOING PARTNERSHIP WITH A HABITAT FOR HUMANITY AFFILIATE

I established a partnership between my professional writing course and a local Habitat for Humanity affiliate (MAHFH) six years ago to offer my students real-world experiences writing for a community partner. The course that I teach is called Written Communication for the Workplace, and it is a 400-level course that students studying Business Administration or Construction Science and Management are required to take in their junior or senior years. Students enrolled in the online version of the course can be in-person, fully online, or hybrid learners. The student learning objectives of the course indicate that by the end of the semester, students will be able to

- Identify the audience or audiences of a writing task and analyze their needs, attitudes, expectations, and the rhetorical purpose of the writing task in order to present information accurately and persuasively.
- Produce documents typically required of workplace professionals that meet readers' informational needs and genre expectations (e.g., they are well-organized,

acknowledge realistic constraints, credible, current, comprehensive, and accurate).

- Identify a work-related problem or opportunity in order to complete a project that presents results, discussion, and conclusions.
- Gather, analyze, evaluate, and/or synthesize information from print and electronic sources, including workplace documents, to develop writing projects and present and document sources accurately and ethically.
- Integrate visuals, text, and basic principles of document design using appropriate digital technologies.
- Adapt a written text for the purposes of an effective, professional oral presentation.
- Revise and proofread documents for readability, accessibility, ethical presentation, style, tone, and usage.

This partnership with MAHFH began when I taught an in-person section of Written Communication for the Workplace. When I first moved to this town to begin my new teaching position, I contacted ten nonprofits in the area, wanting to make connections for community-based learning partnerships and wanting to learn more about my new community. I quickly realized how difficult it was to juggle partnerships with five different nonprofits in one semester, especially when I was not yet familiar with each nonprofit's scope of work. After collaborating with multiple organizations for three years, some community-based learning partnerships fizzled out, but my partnership with MAHFH remained strong. The Executive Director of the organization found the students' contributions valuable, and students easily grasped onto MAHFH's work – perhaps because most, if not all, students were already familiar with Habitat for Humanity's brand or had even volunteered on a Habitat build site before.

Originally, MAHFH's Executive Director and Office Manager would come visit my class to deliver a presentation about the organization's work in the community and then meet with the students in small groups to discuss their projects. Typically, these staff members would come back to the classroom a few more times throughout the semester to critique students' rough drafts, watch their final presentations, and offer questions and feedback. We developed a comfortable rapport during the first three years that we were collaborating, and as I became more knowledgeable about Habitat's work in our community, I could answer more of the students' questions rather than directing all their questions to the Executive Director. Additionally, as the partnership evolved, the Executive Director became more honest in her feedback to students, feeling less of a need to shower them with praise when their projects actually needed substantial revisions.

However, during Spring 2020, both the Executive Director and Office Manager resigned their positions at MAHFH. At first, I worried that this would end my long-term partnership with our local Habitat affiliate, but since I was finally understanding the details of Habitat's mission and work in our community, I was hopeful that the next Executive Director would find value in collaborating with my course. After a few meetings with the new Executive Director and Development Manager, I assured them that I was familiar with Habitat's work and remained committed to continuing the partnership, even if this meant making significant changes to my course's project.

In fact, completely revising the project's scope and genre convinced Habitat's new leadership to continue collaborating with my class. Throughout the partnership with the previous Executive Director, students created documents typical of a professional writing course, such as brochures, infographics, and websites. However, Habitat's newly hired staff realized that they needed more personal writing that would portray the organization's missions and goals accurately, destigmatize their work in the community, and correct inaccurate beliefs that many community members held about MAHFH (such as the false belief that Habitat "gives away free homes"). Most importantly, MAHFH needed to inform the community that Habitat's approach to homeownership is to offer a "hand up, not a handout" by providing 0% interest loans to qualifying homeowners. To qualify for a home, potential homeowners must go through a lengthy application process and financial review to ensure that they will be able to afford a mortgage. Additionally, new homeowners must put 400 hours of "sweat equity" into the home through activities such as assisting on the build site by painting walls, cleaning the structure, installing trim, picking up trash, or any number of projects that need to be completed before they can move into the home – another fact that many members of the local community were often unaware of.

To deliver this information through the voices of the people involved with the organization, the Development Manager asked that the students write profile articles about MAHFH's homeowners and tease out those topics during Zoom interviews. Because of COVID-19, the course had transitioned to an online modality, and all interactions with community members also had to occur remotely. Additionally, unlike the brochures, infographics, and websites that students created for the previous Executive Director, which were all typical assignments frequently taught in our department's professional writing curriculum, profile articles had not been taught in the curriculum before. However, the project presented a creative opportunity for professional writing students to try a new writing genre, and complying with the Executive Director's request in meeting the organization's goals would also allow my class to maintain a long-term partnership with MAHFH.

Maintaining this long-term community partnership was particularly important, given that much of the existing research on community-based learning emphasizes how the most impactful and reciprocal community engagements are long-term, rather than short-term partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Furco, 1996). As my partnership with MAHFH evolved with Habitat's new leadership team and the project transitioned to an online course modality, I realized how valuable my past three years of collaborating with Habitat's staff had been, particularly for these moments of uncertainty and transition. Since I was already quite familiar with Habitat's mission and work in our community and could demonstrate how allocating these writing projects to students could save the new staff members' time, I was able to show how the partnership could continue seamlessly, rather than being an additional burden to Habitat's new leadership as they were moving into their new roles. In contrast, I now realize that many of the partnerships with nonprofits that fell apart after one or two years likely disintegrated because I was not as enmeshed and fluent in my community partners' work, and students' projects likely did not meet the organization's expectations, so the partnerships failed to be mutually beneficial. However, focusing on one organization rather than juggling several community partners allowed my students and I to become more deeply invested in and knowledgeable about our partner's work.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATIVELY WRITING PROFILE ARTICLES

SCAFFOLDING ASSIGNMENTS AND PLANNING DOCUMENTS

To begin, the Development Manager, Bruce (all names have been changed for anonymity), emailed the homeowners whom MAHFH wanted to profile in these articles. After we had solidified our list of willing interviewees, I created a Google Doc where students could sign up in groups of three to profile a specific homeowner. Students also drafted an email to their interviewee in that first week because I anticipated that it might take one to two weeks for students and interviewees to find an agreed-upon time to have the interview, so I stressed the importance of contacting their interviewees early. [Table 1](#) shows how this project was scaffolded and the assignments that students completed throughout this unit.

MANAGING COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS AND PREPARING BACKUP PLANS

While some students received instant responses from their interviewees, others started to panic when one or two weeks passed without a response from their assigned

WEEK	ASSIGNMENT	PURPOSE
1	Team Charter and Task Schedule	To agree on a consensus for how the group would function and outline a timeline for completing the project.
1	Inquiry Email	To contact their interviewee, provide a preview of the interview questions, and establish a date and time to have the interview.
2	Examining Sample Documents	To review profile articles written by other Habitat affiliates to understand the document's purpose, format, and come to a shared consensus on expectations for how the article would be written. Students also reviewed content on MAHFH's website to gain an understanding of the organization's missions and goals, as well as learn more about a lack of affordable housing in the community, barriers to homeownership, and causes of income inequality.
3	Design and Active/Passive Voice Quizzes	To demonstrate understanding of design principles and the use of active and passive voice.
4	Fall Break	
5	Peer Review	To critique peers' profile articles and receive constructive feedback about how to improve their articles.
6	Individual Performance Review and Reflection	To reflect on the community engagement project and evaluate the group's performance.
6	Final, Revised Draft	To incorporate the feedback from the interviewee, Habitat staff, instructor, and classmates into a final, polished draft that meets the audience's expectations.

Table 1 Outline of the Profile Article Unit and Scaffolding Assignments.

homeowners. If too much time passed, Bruce emailed the homeowners to follow up. Most of the interviewees who had not responded to the students' initial emails did respond once Bruce contacted them. However, the gap in communication presented the class with an opportunity to reflect on the communication expectations that they held, where these expectations came from, and the factors that might make it difficult for the homeowners to prioritize responding to the students' emails. Scheduling the interview was obviously a priority for the students since they had to complete the project by the end of the semester, but none of the community members were operating within the constraints of the academic semester, so they did not all share the same sense of urgency for scheduling this interview. Through discussion boards and emails, we reflected on ways that caregiving conflicts, nonstandard working hours, and access to transportation and reliable internet connections often contributed to the community members' availability for communication. Unlike communication with their professors, which is typically prompt, communicating with the community members more accurately mirrored "real-world" communication practices, which varied from quick, attentive responses to emails to delayed responses requiring multiple modalities of contact, including calling them rather than emailing.

WRITING AND EDITING THE ARTICLE WITH THE COMMUNITY PARTNER

Depending on the interviewees' preferences, students conducted and recorded their interviews through Zoom, Teams, or over the phone. Students had already outlined many of the interview questions they would be asking in their inquiry email, so interviewees had some expectations for the types of questions they would be asked. After transcribing the interview, students wrote

a rough draft of their articles and shared those articles with their interviewee. I stressed how crucial it was that students share their working drafts with their interviewees and with Bruce to ensure that they were representing MAHFH and the homeowners accurately, and to give the homeowners a chance to edit their articles.

The homeowners offered varying levels of feedback on the student projects. Several people responded with short, affirming emails that showed appreciation for the students' work. Others offered detail-focused edits, such as children's ages, family members' names, or other factual edits. Some homeowners went even further, becoming very involved in the editing process by using Track Changes to add new quotes to the articles or changing the students' phrases to better reflect their speaking tones and styles. By collaborating on a working document, both the student writers and the community writers played a role in shaping the final text. Even if the community members were only able to offer short comments on the drafts, offering the option to engage in collaborative editing ensured that this public-facing text would ethically represent homeowners' stories. I also told students that their articles would not be complete until their interviewees had signed off on them, and this led to some groups writing up to four drafts before their interviewees were satisfied with the article.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT

INCREASE OF WORKPLACE-RELEVANT WRITING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

At the end of the semester, I administered an IRB-approved, voluntary, anonymous survey based on

Missouri State's CASL questionnaire to gauge if this new writing genre met the professional writing curriculum's student learning objectives. Of the 38 students enrolled in the course, 37 students took the survey, resulting in a 97% response rate. In response to the question "The profile article assignment was relevant to ENGL 417 course outcomes and prepared me with writing and communication skills that will be beneficial in the workplace," 46% of the students strongly agreed, and 43% agreed that this assignment was relevant to the course and that it prepared them to be successful workplace communicators. 8% of students neither agreed nor disagreed, and 3% (1 student) disagreed.

As one student remarked in an open-ended reflection,

At first, I was hesitant to enjoy a group project in an online course. It was hard to come up with times to meet as a group and complete assignments altogether. However, a real-world professional writing project was very beneficial for me. It was really important for our group to portray our individual in the best light and do her story justice. I learned a lot from this experience and will be able to use it on my resume or when talking about my professional experiences. Thank you for the opportunity, I learned a lot!

Although they acknowledged the difficulties of collaborating with others in an online environment, students ultimately valued having experiential writing opportunities that they could discuss in job interviews. Students also appreciated having the ability to practice and apply the skills that we had covered throughout the course by creating real documents for workplace audiences.

In the second question, which was meant to evaluate the transferability of writing skills that students gained from the project, 38% of students strongly agreed, and 46% agreed that this project prepared them to solve real-world writing and communication problems that they might encounter in future workplaces. 14% of students neither agreed nor disagreed, and 3% (1 student) disagreed. As one student noted, "I think every class should have a real-life project at the end. I learn way more from these types of projects than anything else." However, in the open-ended reflection, some students also acknowledged that "it was a hassle" to contact their interviewee before the end of the semester, and that collaborating with peers and people outside of the classroom was particularly challenging in an online setting.

In the third question, students reflected on how this project helped them understand why writing and communication skills are important in the workplace. 46% of students strongly agreed, and 54% agreed that after completing this project, they had a better

understanding of why writing and communication skills are important in the workplace, resulting in 100% of students agreeing that the project helped them understand the value of writing and communication skills in the workplace. Similarly, in the last question gauging students' writing and communication skills, 46% of students strongly agreed, and 54% agreed they utilized these important writing and communication skills effectively throughout the project, indicating that the project required all students to use and apply the writing and communication skills that they had studied throughout the semester.

LEARNING SKILLS FOR COLLABORATING IN A VIRTUAL SETTING

Another valuable takeaway that students had after completing the project was that the experience increased their ability to collaborate in a remote setting. 41% of students strongly agreed that this community-based learning experience increased their abilities to collaborate in a virtual setting, 57% agreed, and only 3% (1 student) neither agreed nor disagreed.

All students (with 51% strongly agreeing and 49% agreeing) indicated that since this project was going to be shared with a public audience, this experience helped them understand why it is important to consider one's audience when writing for the workplace, an essential student learning outcome of a professional writing course. However, in the open response section, one student mentioned that this project felt "disconnected" from the rest of the assignments in the course, since the other projects did not include a community-engaged component. To facilitate a more cohesive project in the future and provide students with a 16-week engagement with our community partner, I plan to incorporate aspects of community-based learning into the rest of the course by having students conduct primary and secondary research about MAHFH's audience, goals, and projects and then write up those results in preliminary reports and white papers before they sit down to write with homeowners in our final module.

In open-ended reflections, students remarked on the educational value of writing for "real audiences." As one student wrote, "Writing an article for a real-life organization gave me the opportunity to really think about what I am writing and why. Having an audience read what I write and learn from it is rewarding and helped me learn how to officially communicate within a workplace." Another student reiterated the importance of doing "purposeful" assignments in their coursework, stating,

I really enjoyed this project. Whenever I write things, I like them to be beneficial and purposeful. I want my writing to help or interest people in any way I can. This project was really valuable.

Not only did we get to write about an important member of our community, but we also got to interview her as well. This has been my favorite project in a long time.

Last, I was curious about gauging students' perceptions of how they can impact local social problems in their communities. I did not ask this question before the assignment, only after the assignment, so I am unable to say if the assignment itself shifted students' responses. Ultimately, 30% strongly agreed that they believe they can have a positive impact on local social problems, 54% agreed, 11% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 5% disagreed. However, the open-ended responses indicate that students found it valuable to learn about MAHFH and the ways that the organization approaches local problem-solving.

Furthermore, what students learned expanded beyond the student learning outcomes since students also learned about a resource in the community where the university is located (even though this was an online course, most students indicated that they were taking this class locally, with only three writing from other states). In reflecting on MAHFH's role within the community, one student said,

I was very impressed with how much MAHFH does for the community. They have many services I was unaware about especially that they offer 0% interest loans to the community to help build houses affordably. I really enjoyed the real-world experience.

Another student wrote, "I thought that the combination of first learning about a social service in our community, then writing articles for the service to help spread their message, was a great opportunity." And a third student said,

I enjoyed learning about MAHFH and how it directly impacted an individual in our community. It was interesting to hear their story, and I felt I was doing something important and meaningful by creating a profile article for them. I feel a greater sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from this module than from the other three papers, since it's for more than just a grade.

MAHFH STAFF TAKEAWAYS FROM THE PROJECT

I also solicited feedback from the staff at MAHFH, since it was important to understand whether this project was meeting the organization's expectations and goals. MAHFH is a small organization with only two people

serving in full-time roles. I sent this survey to both full-time employees, and one of them took the survey. Questions on the survey asked the MAHFH staff to evaluate the project's value to the organization and the quality of student writing, content, document style, and document design, all crucial student learning outcomes of the professional writing course. Similar to the students' survey, the questions on the staff members' survey could be answered along a scale of strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

In response to the survey, the staff member who responded strongly agreed that MAHFH benefited from the students' profile articles and strongly agreed that participation in the project created valuable social benefits for their organization. This question was crucial because I wanted to gauge if the project was helping MAHFH contribute to their social mission of "building homes, community, and hope," or if the project was detracting from the organization's capacity to fulfill their mission.

Next, I wanted to assess the staff members' perception of the students' writing, document design, and applicability for an intended audience, which are important concepts for the course and for all workplace writers. That staff member agreed that the profile articles were relevant and informative to Habitat's audience and were written at an appropriate level for their audience. The staff member also agreed that students' articles had a logical and appealing design that was appropriate for Habitat's expectations and for their intended readers, and that students' writing styles were clear, concise, and correct and appropriate for Habitat's intended audience. Last, the staff member strongly agreed that the project helped Habitat complete a useful task that had been on their to-do list. This last question was crucial because I wanted to ensure that the project was truly mutually beneficial and was adding capacity to MAHFH's operations.

While this survey did not ask the nonprofit staff to rank each group's articles individually (because this was not something that the organization had the time or capacity to do), these general responses indicate that MAHFH was satisfied with the student writing. When the project was in the review stage, where students were soliciting feedback from Habitat's staff and homeowners, Bruce admitted to me in an email that he did not have the time to provide detailed comments on their work and asked if he could just respond by showing the students appreciation for their work and offering positive commentary, rather than the constructive criticism that we had discussed earlier. While I recognized that receiving Bruce's constructive criticism would have helped the articles better represent the organization's voice, mission, and tone, I also realized that it was important to respect my community partner's boundaries. However, as an employee mentioned in the

open-response question at the end of the survey, this project was still successful at helping the organization complete important tasks that would have otherwise taken them a longer time to accomplish: “This project helped us kickstart telling the stories we’ve needed to tell. It was great to have so many students interviewing so many stakeholders in our organization.”

HOMEOWNER TAKEAWAYS FROM THE PROJECT

Unfortunately, I was only able to gather anecdotal responses about the homeowners’ experiences working with students, since my emails for survey requests did not receive responses. However, during informal conversations at Habitat for Humanity fundraising events, I learned about two homeowners’ perspectives. One homeowner mentioned how happy it made her to be interviewed and to share the profile article about her pathway to homeownership on her social media pages. She hoped her story would inspire others who had previously seen homeownership as out of reach to realize it could be possible through Habitat for Humanity’s programs. Another homeowner had a different takeaway, remarking that the students’ profile article about him was still missing some important details about his journey to becoming a Habitat homeowner, so he felt that the story did not fully portray his pathway to homeownership. After receiving no responses to my surveys, I realized that surveys might not be the appropriate mechanism to gather this feedback – maybe the surveys felt too sterile, or seemed too time-consuming – and perhaps, instead, informal conversations could be more authentic ways to engage with the homeowners’ experiences. I plan to continue asking homeowners about their experiences with the project as I interact with them at upcoming Habitat for Humanity fundraising events. This might not be the most efficient way to learn about their perspectives, but these conversations allow me to receive feedback on the project while also building relationships with the homeowners who make our collaboration possible.

CONCLUSION

This article contributes to ongoing conversations about how online, asynchronous courses can meaningfully engage students while creating beneficial community impacts. Unlike college courses, which tend to have the same student learning objectives for many years, community partners’ needs and rhetorical situations change much more fluidly. To maintain long-term community-based partnerships, instructors must also be fluid in adapting and modifying their assignments. If we are aiming for reciprocal and mutually beneficial

partnerships with community members, we need to place the community partner at the forefront of our course design. We should also consider reviewing our community partners’ calendars as we are planning our syllabi so that we can schedule these projects to better align with their availabilities, rather than only considering our 16-week timeframe.

While I was not able to gather much feedback about the community members’ experiences, additional research about how community members interact with our students in online community-based learning partnerships could help instructors gain a more comprehensive understanding of how all stakeholders interact with a course project. Learning about community members’ and nonprofit partners’ experiences would ideally push instructors to continuously revise course projects to prioritize community partners’ goals and accurately elevate community members’ perspectives. Finally, this article explores one localized community partnership with an online professional writing course. There is no set formula to approach a community-based learning partnership because all partnerships vary based on the community partner’s assets and needs, as well as the institutional partner’s curricular parameters and programmatic objectives. However, this framework might inspire other instructors and administrators to consider creative ways to increase student learning and engagement by embedding collaborative community-based learning projects into online, asynchronous courses.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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