Service-Learning Class: Writing for the Community

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Purpose

- Explores research and writing strategies common to both academic and workplace settings in a classroom format.
- Helps students understand the crucial concept of audience.
- Unites students' service interests with their academic pursuits.

Background

Dr. Shireen Campbell, a professor in the English department, created English 201: Writing for the Community so that students could learn technical writing skills while serving the needs of community nonprofit agencies.

How It Works

The Office of Community Service and Bonner Scholars identify agencies that have writing needs and process the requests three months before the class begins. Students listen to presentations by community service organizations on their needs and then submit a list of agencies that interest them, along with reasons for the interest. An appropriate number of students are assigned to each project. The students research, write, and design a wide variety of texts for their community clients so that at the conclusion of the semester, there is either a finished, publishable product or other written material that the agency can use internally.

The class is taught as a full-credit course over a semester. Students are required to read John Trimbur's *The Call to Write* and the *Service-Learning Reader: Reflections and Perspectives on Service* edited by Albert Gail, et al.

In addition to the writing assignments, students are required to contribute to meaningful class discussions, compose a literacy narrative, a public document analysis, and an argument essay. As a class, students collect information, design, draft, and revise some type of publication determined by the professor. One example of a past project is the creation of a bilingual brochure describing the range of resources and programs focused on the Hispanic community in the North Mecklenburg County area.

Finally, students work in small groups to research, draft, revise, and present results of various projects to college and community service organizations. The projects may range from writing grant proposals or publicity brochures to writing public documents for Web publication.

What Makes The Project Unique

The class unites the community and the college in a way that is productive for both parties. The students develop appreciation for the administrative side of a nonprofit agency, while the agency receives pro bono assistance with a research/writing project.

Benefits

Students develop technical writing skills while also drawing on their creativity to create visually exciting designs and layouts.

Students work in teams, collaborating and negotiating in a way that rarely happens in other academic settings. They also have the opportunity to explore local nonprofit organizations in depth, which is an unusual experience for volunteers. They are held accountable, not just to the professor, but to an actual organization, and this makes them care more deeply about their work.

Community agencies receive professional-quality publications free of charge, thereby giving them more time and resources to apply for grants, expand their volunteer base, or serve clients. Some agencies receive crucial assistance with the time-consuming task of research and writing. It is an ideal way for the community to benefit from the strengths and talents of Davidson students.

Timeline

In the months before the class begins, Dr. Campbell gathers suggestions for projects from the Office of Community Service, Bonner Scholars, and past community partners.

The semester-long course meets for a total of three hours per week. The day-to-day class proceedings focus on readings that the students are assigned. There are three essays, a class research/writing project, and a final project due throughout the semester.

Resources And Partners

Davidson College
- The Community Service Office connects the community agencies with the professor.
- The English Department regularly offers the class.
- The Office of Communications sends its staff to the class to introduce topics such as visual representation and graphic design.
- Various campus departments, such as college communications and central services, offer technological support with specialized software and printing needs.

Community Agencies
- The agencies vary each time the class is taught, but have included free medical clinics, after-school programs, nonprofit daycare centers, bone marrow typing drives, Habitat for Humanity, and a local race relations committee. If possible, the organizations contribute the printing costs for the designed materials.

Overcoming Challenges

The greatest challenge with this class is that it changes from year to year. The type of projects on which the students are working dictates the skills they need to learn in the class. Therefore, each semester the instructor must modify the class so that the students master the skills they need to complete their projects in a professional manner. There is also no specific textbook that is appropriate for this level of technical writing so the reading list is constantly evolving.

Evidence of Success

Davidson students must evaluate each course they take. The anonymous student evaluations for Writing for the Community have been extremely positive. The students report learning and growth which is an excellent indication of the success of the class. In addition, the publications have been very well received by the community agencies. A large number of students continue to enroll in the class and are eager to see it offered on a more consistent and frequent basis.

How to Make it Grow

Dr. Campbell is currently seeking a grant to underwrite publication costs of materials produced by English 201 for agencies that cannot afford it. A long-term goal is to get sufficient money to endow $1,500 per class toward publication costs.