The Group Project's Potential

Emphasizing Collaborative Writing with Community Engagement

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Abstract

This study examines strategies for emphasizing collaborative writing in a community engagement project. Doing so can enrich students' experiences with ethical community engagement. Successful collaborative writing provides students with competencies—rhetorical knowledge, confidence, understanding of transfer, and appreciation for diverse perspectives—that are key building blocks in supporting students as they deepen their engagement with social issues. Current research demonstrates how collaborative writing and community engagement experiences provide overlapping benefits. Pairing them has the potential to amplify students' learning, including their understanding of their ability and responsibility to use writing as a tool to affect meaningful change.

Introduction

Group projects are a feature of many students' undergraduate experiences; yet too frequently students come to dread them, especially group writing projects. They recall past experiences when they faced a range of other challenges. These challenges can impede students' understanding of how successful collaboration works or appreciation of its value. Collaboration can also be difficult for instructors to support. It takes a great deal of time and requires that instructors help students navigate a range of interpersonal and project management skills.

Despite these challenges, collaborative projects should be a central part of the writing curriculum. As a large body of scholarship points out, writing is social, and collaborative writing yields many benefits, including deepening students' understanding of writing (Metz Bemer et al., 2009; Fontaine & Hunter, 2006; Bush & Zuidema, 2013; Deveci, 2008; and Speck 2002). Instructors can support collaborative writing with purposeful teaching to reimagine what group projects look like and how they work.[1]

In particular, instructors can enhance students' experience with collaborative writing by incorporating a community engagement project. It approximates the real-world collaboration students will likely experience at future jobs. It provides meaningful work to

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[1] *In framing this work, I draw from Paul Benjamin Lowry et al.'s (2004) definition of collaborative writing as an "iterative and social process that involves a team focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates, and communicates during the creation of a common document" (p. 72). All participants are responsible collaborators who contribute in equitable and meaningful ways throughout the writing process.*

engage and motivate students. And its complex nature lends itself well to conversations about the value of collaboration and strategies for undertaking it. In planning these projects, instructors must be thoughtful and deliberate in structuring the project around productive collaborative writing. In this study, I describe a business writing course focused on a semester-long community engagement project. The curriculum centers on promoting successful collaborative writing by using a three-part approach in which students:

- build a framework for successful collaborative writing,
- apply collaborative writing with a community engagement project, and
- reflect on collaborative writing to anticipate transfer.

Students found deep value in collaborative writing when they were provided with extensive instruction, support, and practice during the community engagement project. Course artifacts demonstrate that the experience enhanced students' understanding of the writing process and rhetorical concepts. They produced strong documents and became more confident writers prepared for future professional and public contexts. They also noted a greater appreciation for the value in critically examining diverse perspectives.

With this foundation, attention to collaborative writing can also enrich students' experience with community engagement. The competencies gained through collaborative writing—rhetorical knowledge, confidence, understanding of transfer, and appreciation for diverse perspectives—are key building blocks in supporting students as they deepen their engagement with social issues. In this sense, collaborative writing and community engagement experiences provide overlapping benefits. Pairing

them has the potential to amplify students' learning, including their understanding of their ability and responsibility to use writing as a tool to affect meaningful change. Jason Chew Kit Tham (2021) explains that "social justice practices" are becoming more important to writing studies pedagogy, so instructors must "harness the opportunity we have with them in the classroom to cultivate an awareness of social problems and grow students' motivation to address these problems as engaged citizens of their communities" (p. 11). Emphasizing collaboration alongside community engagement can be an approach to doing so; it can prompt important reflection about ethical citizenship and how they can use writing to affect change in their communities.

Collaborative Writing: Benefits and Challenges

Recent scholarship offers insight into the benefits of collaborative writing. Ingrid G. Daemmrich (2010) encourages writing instructors to incorporate a collaborative writing assignment into their courses to "build community" and increase engagement (p. 162). Jonathan Bush and Leah Zuidema (2013) argue that collaborative writing projects "can give students a new perspective on writing" (p. 110). In a review of research on collaborative writing, Lekha Limbu and Lina Markauskaite (2015) explain that it can "promote deeper learning," "encourage students' initiative, creativity and critical thinking," and "help students to work jointly on shared objectives" (p. 394). Perry D. Klein (2014) shows how research about "collaborative approaches to writing to learn" demonstrates "a strong record of success" (p. 206).

Additionally, collaborative writing can help prepare students for professional contexts where it is common. Abram Anders (2016)

observes that "across diverse disciplines and industries, the way professionals get things done is increasingly social, collaborative, and virtual" (p. 224). Stephen Bremner et. al (2014) argue that "the importance and prevalence of collaborative writing as a feature of workplace activity are now for the most part taken as a given…it has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts that a substantial proportion of the writing that takes place in organizations is carried out collaboratively" (p. 150). Rebecca J. Dumlao (2023) observes that collaboration is important to technical writing: "Technical communicators, in particular, must be able to collaborate skillfully and build effective relationships, whether working locally or internationally. Nurturing student abilities to relate well with people representing different cultural backgrounds, varied life experiences, and diverse levels of education have become pedagogical imperatives" (p. 219).

This context demonstrates that collaborative writing can deepen students' understanding of rhetorical concepts and help them anticipate future transfer. But collaborative writing can be challenging for students and their instructors. Ellen Cecil-Lemkin's (2022) study demonstrates that "the majority of all participants reported anxiety with collaboration" with a "higher rate of anxiety for mentally disabled students" (p. 208). Leigh Henson and Kristene Sutliff (1998) argue that collaborative writing "does present considerable challenge and the potential for problems" when citing previous scholarship that outlines challenges with "unequal distribution of work" and "slacking" (p. 190). Lowry et al. (2004) cite research outlining the challenges associated with collaborative writing, including that it "increase[s] the complexity of the writing process" (p. 70). Terri A. Frederick (2008) explains that students can struggle to navigate interpersonal conflict: "negotiating peer authority and managing conflict [in group projects] are more difficult than teachers may realize" (p. 440). Kirsi Heinonen et al.

(2020) argue that "there is a need to support students in their collaborative writing processes" because research has shown how it is a "highly demanding task" (p. 3).

These challenges may arise because students do not receive extensive instruction on collaborative writing. Nancy M. Schullery and Melissa K. Gibson (2001) note how "instruction for a successful group experience may be lacking" even in courses that require students to work together: "the lack of instruction in group-oriented concepts may be due to several reasons: teachers may believe students already have the skills, may not deem these skills necessary for students, or may find that other curricular demands push group skills beyond the limits of available classroom time" (p. 10). As such, students may not necessarily know about various approaches to this work, which can lead to a tendency to divide the work and write separately. Additionally, Bremner et al. (2014) cite research that business communication textbooks often do not offer "concrete advice" on collaboration or activities to practice it (p. 152).

Put simply, many students do not know how to effectively write collaboratively or why it may be important. They may even have a misunderstanding of what collaborative writing is. Students can therefore benefit from more direct guidance and support in writing courses. And the community engagement project provides an especially valuable opportunity to do so. Indeed, a large body of scholarship on community engagement identifies numerous benefits to student learning, many of which overlap with those associated with collaborative writing. These benefits include helping students practice with engaging critically with diverse perspectives.

Community Engagement Projects: Benefits and Challenges

Scholarship on community engagement projects in technical and professional writing describes how they support students' learning. Allen Brizee et al. (2020) argue that "using service-learning and [community based research] is one of the most effective ways of teaching TPC" (p. 226). Indeed, their research demonstrates that "service-learning students' experiences were more impactful than their nonservice-learning peers" with a long list of benefits, including promoting enhanced attention to civic issues (p. 243). Heather Lindenman (2022) notes that "the potential value of community engagement in writing courses is indisputable" in pointing to extensive research on its benefits, including how it "can deepen student investment," "teach empathy and build meaningful relationships across difference," "deepen a sense of commitment to civic engagement and provide practice in exercising civic responsibility," "expand students' conceptions of what writing is and does," and "improve students' over-all writing skills" (p. 85). Tatiana Batova (2021) provides a similar review in noting that researchers have described community-engaged learning as "an important component of university curricula for many reasons," including preparing students for transfer after graduation, helping them understand "a variety of rhetorical situations," and become more engaged in a course (p. 410). Danielle Nielsen (2016) shares how community-engagement projects can help students "feel more engaged in the classroom community" (p. 251). Susan A. Youngblood and Jo Mackiewicz (2013) point out that projects can be tailored to specific course needs and student interest to increase engagement.

Like collaborative writing, community engagement projects can enhance students' understanding of writing. Chris Iverson (2020) shows that "students can grow rhetorically after early exposure to community-based study" (p. 31). Debra Dimond Young and Rachel Morgan (2020) describe how "community-engaged writing pedagogy helps students better understand and apply the threshold rhetorical principal of audience" and "develop stronger revision practices" (p. 49). Tiffany Bourelle (2014) describes how students in an online course with community engagement became adept at understanding "rhetoric skills, including audience awareness and document design" (p. 258).

Scholarship on community engagement has shown that it can also prepare students for transfer because the projects extend learning outside of the classroom, prompting them to begin thinking about connections to other contexts. In their review of literature on service learning in communication courses, Youngblood and Mackiewicz (2013) show that "students who engage in meaningful, real-world assignments will be better prepared after graduation to communicate and collaborate with others, including business clients" (p. 262). Nielsen (2016) notes how such projects help students "to learn how technical communication is produced and used outside of classrooms" (p. 250). It could provide students with "important professional skills" like audience awareness as well as provide opportunities for students to network and develop professional portfolios (p. 250). Lindenman (2022) notes that among other benefits, "writing beyond the academic sphere" can "promote transfer by catalyzing deep thinking about the differences and similarities between writing for academic and public audiences" (p. 90). Jeremy Branstad (2014) argues that such projects can promote transfer of rhetorical concepts.

However, like collaborative writing, community engagement projects pose challenges for instructors, including taking a great deal of time to identify and plan projects. Batova (2021) outlines these challenges while pointing out that researchers emphasize that the "benefits of community-engaged learning outweigh the challenges" (p. 411). Batova and researchers like Nielsen and Ann Marie Francis (2018) argue that, despite these challenges, these projects can be incorporated in a range of courses, including online courses and shorter intensive courses, in order to help improve students' understanding of course concepts.

This context demonstrates that, like collaborative writing pedagogies, community engagement pedagogies present a great deal of benefits, including deepening students' understanding of rhetorical concepts and helping them anticipate how they will use such concepts in diverse contexts. Incorporating thoughtful collaborative writing into community engagement projects has the potential to amplify these benefits.

Collaboration and Community Engagement

Community engagement projects often involve collaborative writing. Amy Rupiper Taggart (2007) describes the various ways that these projects challenge single authorship, which can include collaboration with an organization and collaboration within the classroom. Dumlao (2023) identifies community-engagement's close ties to collaboration: "Service-learning can enable students to work directly with classmates in groups or with multiple people in the community" and as such "encourages technical communication faculty to use service-learning projects to teach online students about collaboration and problem solving" (p. 219).

Dumlao (2023) offers guidance on preparing students to be ethical collaborators with external partners; instructors can facilitate conversations between collaborators and strive for establishing clarity about goals and responsibilities (pp. 225-7). Elisabeth Kramer-Simpson and Steve Simpson (2018) also emphasize this part of the collaboration: "While it is important to consider the educational benefits for students, reciprocity is critical to a successful service-learning partnership; the activity needs to benefit the organization and must account for the nonprofit's needs, constraints, and timetables" (p. 93). Erin Brock Carlson (2023) presents a similar call: "When TPC scholars interact with communities and nonprofit organizations, we should seek to build sustainable relationships that yield projects that serve communities first" (p. 174). Amy C. Kimme Hea and Rachael Wendler Shah (2016) urge instructors to consider community partners throughout the projects. In another study, Shah (2020) further emphasizes that instructors and students must consider "how community members themselves view and experience community engagement" (p. 5). This work should privilege those who have been marginalized by "white, male, and privileged voices" (p. 10). Some of the most important recent work in community engagement research and pedagogy focuses on supporting students as they engage ethically with the larger community, especially members of marginalized communities. Jennifer Bay and Rachel Atherton (2021) describe how digital tools and related pedagogies can teach "ethical data literacy" that encourages "respect for marginalized groups" (p. 12). Nora K. Rivera and Laura Gonzales (2021) remind instructors: "Community engagement projects should not just be transactional activities in which students create something for an organization. Instead, students should learn about the history and mission of the organization(s) they are working with, and should be guided to make valuable relationships and sustainable partnerships that extend beyond a single project or semester" (p. 61). Jason Tham

and Jialei Jiang (2022) outline pedagogical approaches that encourage social advocacy with these collaborations, especially through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion (pp. 130-1).

Tham (2022) provides important insight on how collaboration—both among students and between students and community members—is important to "inspire social innovation and activate social change" (p. 21). Tham argues that writing instructors must incorporate "socially relevant pedagogy":

> As students practice and develop their writing, we must also harness the opportunity we have with them in the classroom to cultivate an awareness of social problems and grow students' motivation to address these problems as engaged citizens of their communities. Certainly, such pedagogical labor isn't easy work. Writing instructors face institutional and structural challenges to enabling social justice pedagogy. As social problems continually emerge and evolve, so must our pedagogical methods, particularly in service-learning projects and social justice practices in order to design socially responsive courses and to measure their impact. (pp. 11-12)

Tham proposes that students collaborate on community engagement projects through the lens of design thinking, which helped first-year composition students "see a problem from multiple perspectives" and "human factors surrounding complex social concerns" (p. 17). As students become more open to different perspectives—including their peers as well as those from members of the larger community—they begin to learn about approaching problems in complex ways that consider many stakeholders. This understanding is key to fostering a mindset that will enable students to use their writing to address community issues in just ways.

With collaboration having the potential to foster such important conversations about ethical writing and its ties to social advocacy, instructors must incorporate pedagogical tools that encourage it. Some research provides pedagogical approaches for supporting collaboration in community engaged courses. For example, Andrew Mara (2006) provides an overview of a collaborative approach for technical writing courses that incorporate service learning. The approach facilitates collaboration between students and between students and the larger community by using "charettes," a model from architecture and design, to engage community members in decision-making (p. 221). This model emphasizes the benefits of collaboration and encourages students to deepen their civic engagement (p. 216). Mara explains a process of organizing such projects to promote the many forms of collaboration within the course, including "by organizing the class into working units" with "task leaders" that "facilitate" the work (p. 230). Jennifer Sano-Franchini et al. (2023) explore the potential of using collaboration platforms such as Slack to contribute socially just classrooms: "[Slack] enhanced social justice outcomes in our online course in two key ways: (1) pedagogical community building and (2) accessibility. When we say pedagogical community building, we are talking about activities that foster a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual respect, including openness to hearing, sharing, and exchanging various viewpoints and experiences, and thus the willingness and ability to learn from all members of the classroom community" (p. 138). Jessica Behles (2013) also examines how technical communication students could benefit from using online collaborative writing tools to practice collaboration (pp. 40-1). Lynda Walsh (2010) suggests that technical communication instructors incorporate wikis into "client projects," as her study revealed they led to "improved collaboration" among students (p. 185). In discussing an online service-learning course, Bourelle (2014) emphasizes that instructors can use collaborative technology such

as discussion boards to facilitate this work (p. 258); and instructors can guide students to document their experiences with time management, communication, and other "interpersonal skills" that are integral to collaboration (p. 259).

Melody A. Bowdon and J. Blake Scott (2003) provide extensive attention to collaborative writing in service learning, noting that "[i]n our teaching of service learning, we've found that the collaborative emphasis can lead to students' greatest challenges and best learning" (p. 127). They note that poor collaboration "can compromise the quality of the final projects" (p. 128). To address these challenges, they provide strategies that students can implement, such as using appropriate technology and managing time effectively. In terms of supporting collaboration within the classroom more generally, Cecil-Lemkin (2022) provides several "pedagogical suggestions to increase accessibility" in collaborative projects in order to engage all students, including students with disabilities (p. 210). These include "teaching collaboration skills," "intentionally building teams," "clearly dividing the work," and "offering single-authored options" (pp. 211, 212, 214, 215). Heinonen et al. (2020) recommend that instructors use "instructional scaffolding" to help students with collaborative writing; this scaffolding is a "collaboration script [that] is a set of instructions used to improve collaboration among students during the learning process" by promoting conversation and shared goals (p. 3).

These suggestions are helpful as part of a larger design that emphasizes collaborative writing. I build upon and extend this research to present a comprehensive course design and pedagogical interventions to support this work.

Centering Collaborative Writing through Community Engagement

I identified a business writing course, Writing for Business Organizations, as an opportunity to emphasize collaborative writing with a community engagement project. This approach fits well with our university's Writing Program mission, which seeks to "creat[e] the intellectual atmosphere in which students can acquire rhetorical knowledge and strategies to write purposefully, incisively and ethically" in both public and professional contexts (Roger Williams University 2024). Emphasizing collaborative writing and community engagement has the potential to help students meet this goal. As a business writing course, it also provides students with what Linda Mahin and Thomas G. Kruggel (2006) describe as "sound theoretical and practical ground for the application of writing and speaking skills to solve problems and effect change" (p. 324). With this goal in mind, I designed this course with a three-part structure that emphasizes collaborative writing:

- building a framework for successful collaborative writing,
- applying collaborative writing with a community engagement project, and
- reflecting on collaborative writing to anticipate transfer and consider what it means for their learning.

Analysis of course artifacts demonstrates that this approach helps students be successful in collaborative writing, gain the benefits from it, and feel prepared to use it in a range of future public and professional contexts.

Writing for Business Organizations is an advanced writing course offered at a small private comprehensive university in New

England. The course fulfills a second university-wide writing requirement and is open to all majors. I received approval from the university's Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) to examine how pedagogical interventions affected students' understanding of collaborative writing and writing concepts. Students provided consent to cite their documents. The consent form assured students that participation was voluntary, participants would be referred to by pseudonyms, and participation would not affect their grades. Analysis of written documents occurred after the semester ended and after all documents had been graded and returned.

This approach was piloted in two sections during Spring 2019 and repeated in two sections during Fall 2022. These courses had a community engagement focus with support from the university's Community Partnership Center. Selection of both projects was guided by the CCCC Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition to ensure reciprocal, ethical working relationships with the local non-profit organizations. In Spring 2019, we agreed to revise, expand, and redesign an employee handbook for a history-focused organization. In Fall 2022, we agreed to create an informative guide about a charitable fund's mission and work to support diverse non-profits in the local community. These semester-long projects were complex, requiring students to research, write and revise dozens of pages, design visuals, and make decisions with input from organizations' representatives. In this sense, the project takes the form of what Tom Deans (2000) calls "writing for the community" where students "undertake what are essentially mini-internships and compose purpose-driven documents" (p. 53). A key benefit to this approach is that it prompts "movement between nonacademic and academic literacies" (p. 57). Students could begin to see connections between the classroom and nonacademic contexts

and trace how their writing could make an impact on their larger communities.

These community engagement projects were ideal for supporting collaborative writing. First, they rooted student learning in a "real world" context with clearly defined rhetorical situations. In this way, they were the type of "authentic learning experiences" that Tanju Deveci (2018) argues is necessary to "prepare students for real life" and work outside of the classroom (p. 730). The projects' "real-world" nature helped many students find motivation to put in effort to carry out strong work, which Alexa Darby et al. (2013) note as particularly important (p. 101). Students took special interest in the projects for various reasons, including motivation to help a local organization or to gain skills that could be translated to future jobs. Bruce W. Speck (2002) argues that collaborative writing can be more effective when students have some interest in the project (pp. 39-40), and many students found the community engagement project to be very exciting, especially because of the local connections.

Additionally, the community engagement projects' complex nature required collaboration. Practically, there was no way one student could accomplish all the tasks. The complexity required different skills, with tasks ranging from research to writing to design and editing, which helped students understand value in working with others with varying talents and interests. This quality provided an opportunity to demonstrate how the writing process can strengthen a document, especially in terms of working with feedback. Often, opportunities are limited to brief and artificial exercises like peer review questions that students may or may not read; here, the feedback was integrated into the writing and decision-making process. As students worked with each other to provide and receive feedback, they had opportunities to practice a

range of skills essential to collaborative writing such as time management and clear, respectful communication. They also received feedback from the organizations, which deepened this experience.

The community engagement projects provided genuine insights about how workplaces function and especially how collaboration is integral to a nonprofit organization's success. Students became familiar with organizations throughout the project by reading their websites, documents, and talking with organization representatives. For example, during a meeting with the class, a representative from the historical organization emphasized that collaboration is key to how the organization functions. She explained employees' roles and mapped out how their work intersected and relied on collaboration.

The projects also highlighted how writing can have a significant impact on some of the most important social issues in the local community. Indeed, in both projects, students saw that the documents were important to the organizations' goals. And many students became interested in these goals, with some extending their research to learn more about the ways these organizations interacted with the local community.

Building a Framework for Collaborative Writing

The course syllabus and the early class meetings introduced the project so as to emphasize the community engagement and collaborative writing components. With this introduction, students knew that the major assignments stemmed from this project and that much of the class time would focus on it. They also knew that

they would get support for this work throughout the semester. In a larger sense, this early introduction showed that collaboration is an essential part of writing. Students may not have considered this aspect before, so it was a helpful start to having meaningful conversations about writing's social nature and the benefits that can arise when embracing it. The first part of the course built a framework for successful collaboration by providing students with a practical and theoretical understanding of it. It did so by (1) introducing key concepts, (2) establishing rapport and community within the classroom, and (3) presenting reflection as a key part of writing.

Introducing Key Concepts in Community Engagement and Collaborative Writing

During the first few weeks, lessons covered key rhetorical concepts and approaches to business writing. The course also provided significant attention to responsible community engagement, including best practices as well as considerations that prioritize the organizations' and larger community members' goals, experiences, and perspectives. As Hea and Shah (2016) make clear, a community engagement course must prioritize this introduction—and many ongoing conversations—about the ethics and dynamics of the many relationships associated with this work (p. 49). Some resources for students could include Ellen Cushman's foundational "The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research" (2002) as well as excerpts from important recent work like Shah's 2020 *Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning* and Christina Santana et al.'s *Anti-Racist Community Engagement: Principles and Practices* (2023). Additionally, our university has a Community Partnerships Center with experts and online resources to help frame these projects.

Many universities present similar resources that are accessible to students. For example, Northeastern University has a guide to the "Principles of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement for University Educators and Researchers" (Riccio et al., 2022) including a useful reference list.

Early lessons also emphasized collaborative writing concepts with discussions and readings about its value and how it works. First, students reflected on previous collaborative writing experiences with informal writing prompts and discussions. They identified the benefits and challenges they experienced, their understanding of how collaborative writing works, and their sense of why it may be important. These discussions were a fruitful way to acknowledge that collaborative writing requires commitment. The discussions connected well with conversations about responsible community engagement, which has similar concerns about considering respecting diverse perspectives.

Next, students built upon this knowledge by reading a variety of sources about collaborative writing. This background focused on the value of transferring collaborative writing skills, even outside of the project and writing classroom. The readings came from a range of venues. Articles from professional-focused publications like the *Harvard Business Review* and *The Wall Street Journal* showed how common and extensive collaborative writing is in a wide range of careers. Websites from industry trade groups highlighted the importance of teamwork in many fields. Reports from accrediting bodies in a range of fields asserted that students should practice collaboration in order to be successful when entering the workplace.

Other readings provided a vocabulary to discuss collaborative writing. Indeed, Lowry et al. (2004) emphasizes the value of having

a shared "nomenclature" when approaching collaborative work (p. 95). These readings included scholarly works like Lowry et al.'s article as well as student-facing documents like those from textbooks and writing center websites.

Students also read about practical strategies for successful collaboration, including learning about technologies, learning styles, respectful communication, and managing challenges that can arise. Joanna Wolfe's textbook *Team Writing: A Guide to Working in Groups* (2010) and Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter's *Collaborative Writing in Composition Studies* (2006) offer strategies that students may find helpful. Drawing from this foundation, the students worked together to write a guiding document for the project. This document outlined an agreed-upon definition and model of collaborative writing for the project and expectations of all students.

Establishing Rapport and Community Within the Classroom

Throughout the first weeks of the semester, the course provided many opportunities for students to get to know others and work with them in low-stakes group discussions and tasks. Students practiced working together and could begin to recognize others' learning styles, strengths, interests, and related skills. Such work fits with Cecil-Lemkin's (2022) suggestion that "rapport" is an important component within group work (p. 213). This rapport-building started in small group discussions before groups were formed.

A key part of this foundation involved modeling effective and respectful feedback to others' ideas and writing. I did so through commenting on an assignment early in the semester and discussing how I make these comments with a goal to support student writing.

I provided vocabulary and sample comments that can offer constructive feedback.

Introducing reflection

Additionally, students frequently reflected on their understanding of collaborative writing as well as their questions, concerns, hopes, and plans for this work as they moved into the community engagement project. This reflection occurred throughout the semester with the goal to prompt students to think critically about these concepts and how they impacted their writing.

Applying Successful Collaborative Writing

Next, students applied this understanding in their writing in formative and major assignments centered on the community engagement project. The course design facilitated successful collaborative writing with (1) thoughtful group selection, (2) student-led management, (3) frequent opportunities to practice collaboration, and (4) continued extensive reflection on collaboration and its impact on their learning.

Thoughtful Group Selection

As students started the project, they became familiar with the organization and plan for the project. As part of this pre-project work, every student wrote an email with a commitment to being a responsible group member as outlined in the class's guiding document. Students then participated in thoughtful group selection. Cecil-Lemkin (2022) provides an overview of strategies for assigning groups, noting that "building accessible collaborative projects may mean including steps to build teams where students'

voices are more likely to be heard and respected" (p. 213). In Writing for Business Organizations, students made recommendations for their group preferences, and I made the final decisions based on these recommendations. This plan provided students with agency while allowing me to manage numbers and help students who may have difficulty finding groups.

A key component of group selection is to encourage students to create successful groups by being thoughtful rather than simply selecting friends or those who are close by. This process was guided by revisiting earlier readings about collaborative writing, especially those about group dynamics. I provided a series of questions on a GoogleDoc page focusing on areas like their working and learning styles, interest in type of work available, schedules, and strengths as writers. Students responded to the questions they felt were important to them, reviewed others' answers, and connected with each other in the document comments, over email, and/or in person.

Next, each small group collaboratively wrote a recommendation with their proposed team members. This task provided them with a low-stakes opportunity to practice writing together even before the project started. This agreement included practical information such as when they will meet, what technologies they will use, and what roles they plan to take.

In both semesters, students worked in small teams. The teams' responsibilities were diverse and included the following sections:

- a project management team,
- a design-editing team, and
- writing teams working on different sections.

The project management team worked with all groups to make a plan for the writing process. This included writing a style guide, setting writing due dates, and answering any questions about the document that may arise. The design-editing team worked with all other groups to assemble the document, which involved organizing the sections, writing the table of contents, and designing cover pages or related visuals. They also worked with the project managers to do final copyediting to ensure cohesion and correctness according to the style guide.

This set-up aimed to demonstrate that this project requires cohesion, which can only happen when teams continually work together. In fact, all sections' description included a note that all teams were expected to work closely with other teams throughout the writing process.

Student-led Management

The project was student-led. Acting as a supervisor, I was available to answer questions and support students with assistance, but they did most of the management work. This aspect helped students to figure out the dynamics of group work for themselves. It also helped to motivate other groups to meet deadlines and produce strong work because they knew that it affected other students, their goals, and their schedules.

Frequent Opportunities for Practice with Collaboration

Most class sessions included a great deal of time—sometimes half of the period—for group meetings and writing workshops. These workshops provided me with opportunities to have conferences with them about their work and their collaboration. This time

helped students manage busy schedules, which can reduce unequal distribution of work. It also provided many opportunities for collaboration across groups. All students worked from shared GoogleDoc pages so that they could easily collaborate across groups and track their writing progress inside and outside of the classroom. The classroom set up allowed for easy collaboration with tables or moveable desks.

Extensive Reflection on Their Collaboration and Learning

The project's assessment structure encouraged reflection on their collaboration. Given the diverse tasks for which groups were responsible, the work on the actual project was not graded. Graded assessment occurred in the two major assignments rooted in metacognitive reflection:

1. a collaboratively written memo where teams made an argument about the effectiveness of their sections
2. an individual self-assessment where students made an argument about how well they met expectations for their contributions to the project.

In the collaborative memo, students wrote to the organization's representatives to describe their contributions to the document. They showed that they made effective rhetorical decisions that met the document's overall goals. They received one group grade for this memo.

The individual self-assessment asked students to reflect on their contributions to their group and the project more generally. This assignment framed the assessment in terms of how well they worked to ensure quality writing, as each student was graded

individually based on this work. Specifically, the self-assessment asked that students evaluate how they met, exceeded, or did not meet expectations for the project so that they could provide a recommendation for their grade. Students needed to include examples and evidence to support these insights by drawing from the expectations outlined for each group on the assignment sheet. They also described how other group members contributed to the project.

The self-assessment aimed to connect academic grading with self-assessment performance evaluations that students may have to do at future jobs. I made it clear that the goal of assessment was not to measure students against each other but rather to examine how successful everyone was in contributing to producing an effective document. As such, I emphasized that all students could succeed. Of course, groups may run into challenges or conflicts, so I provided frequent opportunities for private check-ins and reminded students that I am a helpful resource who can help address these challenges early. Throughout the semester, students wrote informal group and individual status reports so that I could gain some insight into these challenges and incorporate lessons to address them.

At the end of the semester, students continued this metacognitive work by writing a final reflection about their learning over the semester. This assignment also provided an opportunity for students to consider how collaboration impacted their understanding of writing and how the project's connection to the community affected their learning.

Reflecting on Collaborative Writing and Anticipating Transfer

Reflection is key to understanding concepts and anticipating transfer, and the frequent opportunities to consider collaborative writing supported students' success within the project. They wrote a final reflection at the end of the project. The reflection touched on a number of course concepts, including several questions about how collaboration affected their learning by asking them to consider:

- their writing strengths, areas that have improved, and areas for continued improvement,
- the challenges they experienced with collaboration more generally,
- understanding of the theoretical understanding of collaborative writing's value, and
- collaborative writing as it appears or may appear in other contexts such as their majors, internships, future jobs, and advocacy work in their communities.

This reflection helped students think critically about their experiences. The final course periods presented opportunities to share these reflections with classmates and the organizations' representatives.

Findings: Deepening Students' Learning

After the semesters ended, I analyzed student writing, focusing on the self-assessment and final metacognitive reflections to gain insight into what students thought about their learning. In coding, I

made note of larger patterns using qualitative analysis to consider how students discussed "collaboration" and "collaborative writing" as well as important course concepts such as audience, purpose, and transfer to future professional and public contexts. While these responses may not necessarily be representative of a larger population, they highlight how these students tended to feel more confident in writing collaboratively and more certain that collaborative writing strengthened their writing.

Analyzing student artifacts in this way has its limitations, which means that these findings are not necessarily generalizable. The sample size is small and includes a relatively homogenous group of students around the same age with similar academic preparation. Additionally, the study only considers writing from two semesters. The study's focus on reflections presents limitations as students may write reflections that they think instructors would want to read. In a related sense, my role as the instructor could influence my reading of their writing. However, even with these limitations, patterns in these reflections can provide some insight into how these specific students thought about writing after taking this course.

Overall, these artifacts show that students gained a deeper understanding of how collaborative writing works. Students identified how collaborative writing could be helpful to their writing, as it allowed them to gain:

- a deeper understanding of rhetorical decision-making,
- a stronger understanding of the writing process, and
- increased confidence in their writing.

Many felt more confident as they anticipate future work in professional and public contexts that will require collaborative writing.

New Understanding of How to Participate in Meaningful Collaborative Writing

The course design helped students to understand and appreciate how collaborative writing works. Many students expressed surprise that they worked so closely together, which was different from previous group writing experiences. It represents a shift in thinking about collaborative writing, with students coming to appreciate its value. Senior Amanda noted that "this was the first time in my academic career that I had a role in strong collaborative writing." She was surprised that it took so long for her to understand what effective collaboration looks like. Henry explained a similar sentiment: "I gained an appreciation for collaborative writing. My past experiences with collaborative writing were essays where each person would pick a section and never really interact. The collaboration in this class was very in-depth and our thoughts and word[s] were intertwined." Oliver expressed surprise at how different the collaboration was from previous work: "The [community engagement project] was a great look into collaborative writing that we will experience in the real world. Traditionally in college when we work as a group, sections get divided by members to complete their own sections, then submit an assignment without other member[s'] input on their sections."

Students identified a major benefit to this approach in gaining new perspectives by having meaningful conversations about writing. Senior Caroline discussed how "This collaboration process as taught me to embrace my team member[s'] diverse perspectives....

The last four years ha[ve] taught me that I [am] very eager to finish a project as soon as possible. Instead of rushing the creative writing process, this project has taught me that sharing and discussing ideas is crucial. It is important to listen to my group member[s'] diverse perspectives on how to complete the project because sharing ideas can lead to the most effective writing." Students now have the strategies to do this work. Eleanor articulates why she and her group members decided not to work on sections independently as they had done in previous classes. She frames this choice in positive terms as strengthening the project:

> From the beginning of this project, [my group members] and I chose to do all aspects of the project together. Although this may have ultimately taken longer, it allowed us to include everyone's input…. If we had chosen to split the document into sections and had each individual revise a separate part, we may have missed certain changes that were crucial to the effectiveness of the document.

Many students made a similar connection between collaborative writing and producing an effective document. Hannah reflected, "Overall, I was able to see how collaborative writing can be very effective and allow for better work to be produced." She provided more details by describing how her group members made decisions together: "[We] sat down all together to look at each other's work and offer helpful tips to improve. Not only did we help edit each other's work, but we also pitched and ran ideas by one another. If I was unsure of how to word a sentence differently to make it more effective, I would immediately ask for my groupmate[s'] input, and vice versa." Michael also noted that he and his team produced an effective document in large part because of the collaborative writing process:

> My team and I worked together.... This made [the employee handbook] a far more effective document because it required us to check each other's work, which made sure there were more eyes looking at it. They caught things that I would not have, and vice versa. This also caused us to slow down, really discuss every word, and how effective that word was, or could it be subbed out for something better.

He mentions "slow[ing] down" once more in explaining how collaborative writing "requires you to slow down and think critically about what you are writing." This slowing down of the writing process involved having conversations about effective writing and rhetorical choices.

Laura similarly connected the collaborative writing process with the group's strong work. She described how the process prompted her group to pay more attention to the work: "Having three pairs of eyes read every sentence and every word was extremely useful because we continuously helped one another edit each section thoroughly. Our collaboration throughout this project ensured that the sections we produced were as effective as they could be." Mark made a similar observation: "Overall, collaborative writing strengthened the quality of the new [document] and allowed more and better ideas to find their way into revisions." He continued to describe how getting "feedback" from others was instrumental in helping him and the group make decisions that would appeal to readers.

Like Mark and Laura, students frequently explained how getting different perspectives on the project strengthened their work. Samantha noted how the process of working together provided an opportunity for the group to test parts of the project, such as the

table of contents, to better understand how readers could respond to them:

> If one classmate didn't find our document effective, then there was a chance that [the organization's] employees wouldn't either. If [the organization's] employees don't find the table of contents effective, then it does not serve its purpose of enhancing the document for [the organization's] employees. Collaborating allowed us to encounter problems early fix them immediately to ensure the completion of an effective employee handbook.

Samantha is thinking about audience, and the collaborative writing aspect made it easier for her to do so.

Collaborative Writing Provided a Deeper Understanding of Rhetorical Decision-Making

Several other students also expressed a deeper understanding of writing-related concepts, like audience, because of their experience with collaborative writing. Kevin calls the process of collaborative writing "self-teaching" where the group members teach each other about effective writing by having conversations about writing and engaging in "a lot of trial and error" about what worked. Ultimately, he argued that "my groupmates and I became much better at writing" through this process of "self-teaching." Amanda reflected that "collaborative writing forced me to think out loud, which forced me to hear my words out loud. If it was not me correcting myself in my words, it was my teammate. I also had to give reasons behind my thought process – defending my decisions – for my idea to make it to the final draft." Henry pointed to specific concepts covered in the course in observing that "working collaboratively on the employee handbook showed me how writing and reviewing work with other people can greatly enhance each group member's

writing in terms of clarity, correctness, conciseness, and general effectiveness." He provided examples of sentences that the group revised to support his claims. Then he reflected on how this process helped his group write effectively for a specific audience: "Having multiple people look at what one person wrote will showed me and other group members whether or not that information is readily understood by people other than the writer. This understanding is crucial because if an audience cannot readily understand what is written, they will either give up on understanding or make a guess that could be incorrect."

Anna explained that her group worked in a similar way and acknowledged that the process of collaborating helped them think more critically about how to write for their audience: "We analyzed each word to ensure it was appropriately placed and clear to the reader. When we came across an unclear word or phrase, we worked together to change it, creating better audience understanding. Going through the entire document together allowed us to bounce ideas off of each other and brainstorm how to better each paragraph." Molly also connected their collaboration with their work on ensuring the employee manual worked for their audience and purpose: "It was helpful to have three pairs of eyes on the paper at the same time, as we were able to remind each other of the purpose of our section. Due to our collaboration we produced a uniform section that flows well for [the non-profit organization's] employees." She framed this collaboration as helping the group make decisions that would best respond to the project's rhetorical situation.

Kevin explained that his group's "fruitful conversations" and "beneficial conversations" helped them make informed decisions about writing: "With all the input from everyone, there would be some changes that would cause disagreement amongst the group.

This would lead to a very thoughtful discussion on why we should or shouldn't make the proposed change. This process ensured that we were making the right decisions for the right reasons." Paul described this process as helpful when his group made decisions about the document: "Each person decided to listen to each other's idea one at a time. Eventually as a group, we listen to each person's input and made one big final decision together." Robert explained how he and his teammate made informed decisions in reflecting that "we benefited from collaborating because we got to have two opinions and perspectives on each writing decision."

Students described these types of conversations as integral to helping them think through a range of choices they could make to strengthen their writing. Such work is crucial in helping students gain rhetorical awareness and understand how to make choices when confronted with a range of writing situations, especially in future professional and public contexts.

Collaborative Writing Provided a Stronger Understanding of Writing Processes

Students often explained how collaborative writing made the writing process easier for them because their teammates provided support when they were struggling. Caroline reflected on how collaborative writing helped her group draft a strong introduction and other sections: "Collaboration made our section strong and more effective because we were able to share ideas when writing the introduction and receive constructive feedback when making recommendations for [our] section because multiple members were reviewing." She explained that her group found the project difficult at first, but they found success by working together and having conversations about how to proceed. These conversations

not only made the writing process easier but also made the sections more effective: "The diversity of our ideas allowed for different angles on the introduction, ultimately leading to the final draft." Thomas also explained that working together made the process "easier" and lead to his group producing a more effective document. He explained that having "multiple viewpoints" helped his group assess what worked well in their drafts. Henry found that getting feedback from peers was instrumental to his growth as a writer: "I learned that I should always try to get a second opinion on my writing in order to enhance its effectiveness" and that his teammates helped him articulate his ideas in a clear way: "Sometimes one of us would have an idea but not know how to put it into words, so we would ask one another for assistance."

The collaborative writing process helped students understand how receiving feedback helped strengthen their writing. For example, Marissa summarized how collaborating helped her understand the value of peer review: "I developed a greater appreciation for working with a team after this project. I benefited from receiving my peers' feedback on my writing and learning from their habits when editing their work. Writing collaboratively on the handbook helped me to develop as a writer by receiving feedback on my writing and receiving opinions and ideas on how to improve my work. Through this project, I learned the value of peer review." She explained how she will continue to seek out opportunities for peer feedback because she is committed to strengthen her writing skills even more. Additionally, she expressed that she is "more confident in my ability to write in a clear, informative, and concise way."

Collaborative Writing Led to Increased Confidence

Lily expressed a similar sense of confidence in noting that "writing in a group setting improves one's sense of confidence in writing since each writer will have multiple sets of eyes editing and revising

their work. In turn, this will make each writer's writing a better version of what it once was." She felt more confident submitting the final deliverable because she believed that others' input made it a stronger document, but her attention to her writing's growth is also noteworthy. Alexa makes a similar claim: "During the collaboration process, I learned more about my group members and also about myself. We analyzed each other's skills, efficiency, and ability to work in a group." Alexa continued to reflect on her strengths, which she attributed in part to having conversations with her teammates. She explained that she discovered that she had a talent for copy editing and reworking sentences to make them more clear, concise, and consistent. Her group members praised her for this work early in the writing process, so her confidence increased throughout the project.

Collaborative Writing Helped to Anticipate Transfer

Drawing from this confidence, students started to think about how they might apply these skills in future contexts. Lily explained how the project allowed her to gain the confidence to approach writing in the future:

> This [community engagement] project was a useful learning experience that I can add to my 'toolbelt' of skills. Collaborating on this project has refined my editing skills, increased my confidence in writing, and allowed for an opportunity to collaborate with peers—all of which will transfer well in other positions outside of [schoolwork at the university].

She summarized the connection between collaborative writing, an increase in her confidence, and her preparation for future work: "Collaborative writing proved to be useful for this assignment as it

increase[s] writerly confidence, plays on each individual's different strengths, and prepares each student with real-world experience."

Ryan attributed his work the project to an increase in his confidence as he looked ahead to writing in future jobs: "Over the course of the semester, my writing has strongly increased. I became more confident with my writing not only for assignment[s] but real-world collaboration. The [project] involvement is going to create change within my writing to be more professional as I graduate this May." Ryan's confidence will help him as he transitions away from academic work to professional writing. In a similar way, Thomas explained that he is ready to do this work in a professional context: "After the course, I feel that I have the base tools in my toolbox to effectively write a memo or email or collaborative document in any business setting because of the experience with the [community engagement] project and the overall course material. This stems from my new understanding of purpose, audience, and overall structure of professional documents." Like Ryan, Marissa felt excited to collaborate with "peers" and "clients" as she looks ahead to future contexts. Paul expressed how the project helped him gain skills that will be important outside of the classroom: "Overall, working in a group for this project taught me how to be a better communicator and listener," "two traits" that he anticipates will be important in a variety of contexts "in the real world."

Collaborative Writing Provided a Better Understanding of Writing in Public Contexts

As students like Paul emphasize the value of engaging in conversations to gain different perspectives, they are demonstrating that they understand how they strengthened a host

of competencies that will be important to them beyond the classroom. Most students identified this transfer in relation to professional contexts, which makes sense in a business writing course. However, some students responded strongly to the collaboration with the organizations and identified it as providing a new sense of how writing can be so important in public contexts. They saw how writing can be important to a nonprofit's mission and its ability to affect change for important community issues. These students thanked the organizations for providing the opportunity to learn about their work and its impact on the larger community. They felt invested in this work and appreciative that they could be a part of it. For example, Marissa thanked the organization because the experience allowed her to learn about the organization, which she did not know beforehand. Haley expressed a similar message: "Thank you so much for this opportunity and for sharing so much with us about your organization. Taking the time to hear about how nonprofit organizations work has really revealed a personal interest." She continues to write about her interest in the organization and its larger mission.

Allen shared how he took an interest in a local event featured in the charitable fund project, doing "extensive research" to learn more about it even though it was not required for completing the project. Bennett described a similar level of interest in undertaking research to learn more about several small nonprofit organizations that the fund supports. He shared that he wanted this document to positively represent the fund because of its important mission and close ties to the community. In a similar way, Jack felt a responsibility to the organization, so he worked hard to ensure that the document was as strong as possible so as to not "disappoint" the organization's director. Rose identified her responsibility to the organization as a major reason for her motivation to produce a

strong document. Alyssa shared a sincere hope that the organization benefits from the revised document.

Overall, these students shared how they gained a meaningful understanding of *how* writing works in these organizations and *why* writing is important to organizations. Indeed, in memos to the organizations' representatives, they expressed an understanding of how important the documents were to the organizations' missions. They also shared confidence that they produced strong documents that would positively help the organizations, especially because the documents were clearer and more appropriate for their audiences. Lily believed the new employee manual will help the organizations' employees better understand its "mission" and how it "contributes" in important ways to the larger community. Robert shared excitement that the document could "advance the future of the [organization]." Michael shared his assessment that the revised manual will help the organization. He felt pride in his ability to help the organization in this way. He also thanked the organization for allowing him to help participate in this work. Similarly, Claire thanked the organization and expressed how she believed the document would add "value" to the organization as it works to advance its mission. Katie argued that the new manual will greatly help the organization because it "allows employees to understand the mission statement of the organization" as well as its "values." Vanessa revealed that she believed the organization's work was important, and the document she helped produce would help the organization's "employees understand the importance of their work." Indeed, she explained that this work was important to the "company and community" and hoped the document could help the organization and its employees more clearly share its mission with "the community surrounding [it]." She pointed to this document as a tool that "will promote growth for [the

organization's] community." She is beginning to understand that writing has real potential to affect change.

More Robust Attention to Community Engagement

These students demonstrated interest in advancing the organizations' missions through strong writing. Their observations suggest that the collaborative writing process, especially when paired with community engagement, provided them with an important foundation that strengthened their rhetorical knowledge, increased confidence, and appreciation of diverse perspectives. These areas are key to understanding how writing can be used to affect change in public contexts. While students in this course are just beginning to make these connections, it suggests that even more attention to community engagement could guide students to understand this connection more clearly. Future versions of the course will further emphasize ethical community engagement and its implications to help students tease out this connection even more.

With community engagement and collaborative writing so closely aligned in these areas, instructors need to engage students in many explicit conversations and reflections about how they can continue this work in meaningful ways to support social issues in their communities. Students need support in reflecting about how they may be able to use their newfound rhetorical skills and confidence to impact their communities in positive ways. Intentional teaching about collaborative writing supported students' appreciation of the practice, and intentional teaching about the project's connections to social advocacy could yield a similar understanding about students' ability and responsibility to affect change. Future studies

should explore the most meaningful ways that instructors can guide this work.

The course successfully supported students with collaborative writing, and this can provide a foundation for students to explore its close connection with community engagement. Such an emphasis could have a similar effect in deepening student thinking about social advocacy. Pedagogically, this could include a similar framework as collaborative writing focused on building a framework and facilitating reflection:

- Providing a more robust introduction on ethical community engagement and the many considerations of all of the collaboration involved, including the organizations and the community members they serve;
- Extending and expanding these important conversations at every point of the project;
- Considering incorporating additional ways for students to connect with the organizations and their missions, including increasing meetings with representatives site visits, or other ways to become familiar with the mission;
- Including more reflective practice on what the project means for students' learning and goals, including those outside of professional goals; and
- Connecting more fully with campus conversations about social justice and issues that affect local, national, and global communities.

These approaches are not new, having been well-documented in decades of community engagement research. But the key is to balance them with the extensive attention to collaborative writing as they both can bring about learning that can encourage students

to reflect on their responsibility towards social advocacy. This pairing will help students reflect on how the learning they gained from collaborative writing can empower them to affect the change that is important to them.

Conclusion: Confident Collaborators and Citizens

Students identified clear value in collaborative writing through community engagement as they gained more confidence and skill with writing, a better appreciation for engaging with others' perspectives, and a stronger awareness of how writing can be a powerful tool in professional and public contexts. These areas are the foundation that can equip them to better understand how writing can affect real change relating to social issues important to their communities. In this course, those connections are starting to form through a detailed emphasis on collaborative writing. And facilitating a more direct connection between collaborative writing and community engagement work could help students understand how to use writing to affect meaningful change. Indeed, writing courses should seek to prepare students to write ethically for professional and public contexts, and pairing direct attention to collaborative writing and community engagement has the potential to promote this learning.

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