

Composing *With* Communities: Digital Collaboration in Community Engagements

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Service-learning courses have typically encouraged students to write for or about communities. Such courses rarely involve students writing with the communities they serve, despite the growing number of opportunities for collaboration afforded by digital media. Scholarship on collaborative writing with communities in service-learning courses is scarce; research on collaboration using digital, multimodal texts is more so. Arguing that digital technologies have the potential to make service-learning more reciprocal and effective for all participants, this article 1) suggests that digital spaces are an underutilized technology in community-university partnerships; 2) discusses common barriers to using digital mediums collaboratively; and 3) recommends a set of best practices for introducing collaborative digital writing into service-learning courses.

A major challenge for service-learning programs is how to create reciprocal, sustained collaborations with communities, a challenge that persists even as digital tools provide new options for collaborative writing and pedagogy. Research on service-learning finds many benefits of

students' collaborative writing, but often with a focus on collaboration among students rather than between students and their community partners. Despite the many opportunities for collaboration afforded by digital media, it remains the case that the majority of service-learning courses focus either on multimedia products created by students for their communities, or on students' new understandings of their communities. The use of digital media by service-learning students often maintains the characteristics of the "one-way street" model critiqued by Margaret Himley, through which "students go into communities to do writing for community partners, or to teach them something... to do things that they conceivably can't do by themselves" (Cushman, Getto, and Ghosh "Praxis" 4). In the growth of writing on community engagement, the ideal of service-learning^[1] as a reciprocal relationship that meets the community's self-defined needs has become commonplace. In seeking examples of collaborative use of digital media that move beyond a "drive-by" model of service-learning, however, we noted a paucity of theoretical and pedagogical materials available. Scholarship on collaborative writing *with* communities in service-learning courses is scarce; research on collaboration using digital, multimodal approaches is more so.

Seeing a connection between collaborative models of writing and reciprocal models of service-learning, our project began with a mutual interest in how collaborative online writing tools like Google Docs and PB Works can support efforts in service-learning to write *with*, not just *for* or *about* communities. To develop an approach to collaborative digital service-learning that moves beyond a "drive by" model of interaction, we designed a research project based in a Business Writing course at a large research university. The goal of our project was to understand how digital tools for collaboration offer new approaches for university instructors and students to work together with communities in reciprocal ways. Looking specifically at the experiences of students and community partners in a Business Writing course, we 1) suggest that digital spaces are an underutilized tool in community-university partnerships; 2) discuss common barriers to using digital mediums collaboratively; and 3) recommend a set of best practices for incorporating digital collaboration tools into sustainable service-learning approaches.

Local Practices, Digital Delivery

The scholarship of Jeffrey Grabill, Ellen Cushman and Guiseppe Getto provides models of digital projects that successfully engage with local communities. Engaging with members in one of Atlanta's oldest neighborhoods, Grabill writes about the importance of designing information technology tools in community contexts (132). He argues that for digital products to matter to communities, they should be designed *with* those communities (136). Similarly, Cushman and Getto write that "local practices should inform praxes for community outreach" (162), and they present a "framework for theorizing how new media can be composed in a way that honors the local efforts of communities" (162). Their approaches maintain and utilize the practices and infrastructures already in place in those communities, and, at the same time, mediate local and external understandings of the digital media at work. For example, Cushman and her students produce interactive histories for the Cherokee Nation (CN) in a process that solicits and incorporates the feedback of the group's representatives. Cushman respected the local community by both integrating the final stories into CN's existing technological infrastructure, namely their website, and by inviting feedback on rough cuts of the videos by holding a video conference with CN representatives. Getto, in producing a separate documentary on the Allen Neighborhood Center in Lansing, MI, preserves the staff's mode of storytelling by digitally recording their stories and incorporating them into the final video. The community members shared control over how the center was represented through the inclusion of their own voices in the video as well as through screenings of the footage at the organization. Similar to Cushman's video conference with the CN, Getto invited all participants to suggest video revisions before it was produced as a DVD for the Center to use in its orientation training and fundraising events. By creating forums for community feedback, these faculty and students were not just composing for, but also composing *with*, local communities.

Grabill's, Getto's and Cushman's projects demonstrate how digital products created with communities can support more reciprocal community engagements. However, in the Getto and Cushman examples, digital technologies were primarily used to transmit information about the CN and the Allen Neighborhood Center. As

we learned about their work, we found ourselves most interested in their digital processes rather than their products, a use of digital technologies that seemed important to their collaborative approach. Cushman's video conference strategy, for example, inspired us to imagine other ways technology could facilitate reciprocal conversation in the process of writing and working together. We were also curious about the frustrations of collaborating with community partners, and the potential of digital tools to alleviate such tensions. Working from a distance, Grabill at first experienced great difficulty getting information from his collaborators: "My work during the first year was frustrating. Many of my phone calls were never returned, and my overtures were ignored, continually yet productively calling into question the need for this project" (138). While we're under no illusion that digital tools will solve all communication problems, or make all projects successful or necessary, we are optimistic that collaborative spaces like wikis, Google Docs, and online bulletin boards can provide alternatives to models in which technology is used to transmit or uptake information.

Here we ask: are universities and communities taking full advantage of these alternative, collaborative models of digital communication? In "Exploring Uses of IText in Campus-Community Partnerships," Stuart Blythe uses a content analysis approach to evaluate how campuses and communities use information technologies to communicate with each other. Blythe is particularly interested in whether IText is being used for one-way communication or for collaborative civic engagement. He recalls his experiences in one setting,

when I was asked to serve on the Web developments subcommittee of the fledgling partnership center at my campus, the group's initial assumption was that IText could be used to advertise the center and its activities, distribute forms, and publish research. I thought, however, that IText might be useful in other ways, and so my first task was to identify a range of possible uses. To define such a range, I first needed to examine motivations for establishing such partnerships and then examine civic ideals for IText.

Blythe cites Linda Flower's logic of cultural mission and technical expertise, where those doing outreach "help others become more like themselves by sharing their values and technologies." Even a "logic of compassion and identity," Blythe argues, may involve more dialogue and mutual understanding, but still follows a "one-way service model in which the academic is the subject, the provider, who ultimately decides what is best for citizens." In contrast to both the logic of cultural mission and technical expertise and the logic of compassion and identity, *prophetic pragmatism and problem solving*--the logic most promoted by Flower (1997)--focuses on not only "greater mutuality" but also "collaborative social action" (101). Agreeing with Flower's logic, Blythe argues that "we must think about dialogic forms of communication rather than about a one-way model in which experts communicate to lay audiences," which led him to see that "one ideal for IText would be to enable active participation for all involved, both on campus and off" (275). Blythe, finding in his analysis of community-university websites that they maintained a one-way model of communication, encourages us to strive for more egalitarian uses of digital communication.

In the juxtaposition of Blythe, Cushman, and Getto, we see an opportunity for more research on collaborative uses of technology in service-learning courses. By advocating a "writing *with* communities" approach, we envision more sustained collaborations between students, instructors, and community partners through the consistent use of collaborative writing technologies during and beyond the course of the semester. To better understand the potential of this kind of approach, our study focuses on one service-learning class that incorporates collaborative writing pedagogy within a Business Writing setting. In the following sections, we provide an overview of our Business Writing course design, followed by a description of our research methods and findings, and finally a discussion of best practices to encourage sustained digital collaboration between classes and community partners.

Research Methods and Course Design

One common objective of Business Writing courses is to enhance students' rhetorical understandings of professional situations, including communication, document design, and delivery. Service-

learning approaches that involve writing digitally for and with communities can provide a model for Business Writing instructors that seek reciprocal writing experiences for their students. In their study of a technology-intensive service-learning composition course at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Regan and Zuern conclude that, "Students acquired writing and Web page development skills through composing for real audiences, and gained valuable experience teaching people whose life experiences, levels of literacy, and exposure to technology were different from their own" (Abstract). To gauge the results of utilizing technology to communicate with community partners, we created a digital, collaborative, service-learning project for students in one of our Fall 2011 Business Writing courses. Students, most juniors and seniors, were asked to work in teams to generate public service campaigns for a local business or non-profit organization of their choosing. These campaigns would then be organized into the form of recommendation reports, and presented to both community partners and classmates.

The project prompt that we delivered to the students was designed as a realistic version of some more simulated approaches to service-learning outlined in contemporary Professional Writing textbooks. For example, Paul V. Anderson's *Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach* devotes an entire chapter to "Managing Client and Service-Learning Projects" that guides students to determine client needs, submit written proposals to clients, and most relevantly, advocate and educate the client, while deferring to their wishes in the end (519). In a way similar to the client-based rhetoric in *Technical Communication*, client-based simulation in Porter, Sullivan, and Johnson-Eilola's *Professional Writing Online 3.0*—widely used in our professional writing program—encourages students to

"find a client who could benefit from [the analyst's] services, explore that client's needs, design a research plan to elicit relevant information for the client, do appropriate research, and deliver that information (and their recommendation) to the client, in the form of a written report, or a formal oral presentation, or both" ("Your Role as Writer/Researcher/Designer"> "Understanding Context").

While we're inspired by the engagement with clients needs in these examples, we wonder whether their emphasis on long-term profits and clients (rather than, say, partners or collaborators) implies a kind of control that cannot necessarily be assumed in service-learning partnerships. Our intention in this project was to understand universities and communities as reciprocal partners, rather than as served clients.

In these scenarios, we noticed a tendency to work independent from clients after initial meetings, a tendency shared by service-learning projects in which students write for but not with community partners, producing texts without soliciting the partners' voices, expertise, and feedback. We hypothesized that a more interactive approach (especially using digital technologies) would help us understand what possibilities emerge when students work *with* community partners *throughout* their projects, rather than just at the beginning. To encourage more sustained interactions, we revised the project prompt, adding suggestions that would inspire students to gain feedback, share progress, and request opinions from community partners throughout the project. We used suggestive rather than mandatory language here because we wanted to acknowledge the nuances of individual partnerships, and give both students and their community partners the ability to determine their own levels of commitment and interaction. We didn't require students to invite organizations into their working spaces also because we were curious to know how students felt about this kind of in-progress interaction. Flexible spaces like these created openings for interview questions and reflections that would not be possible if students were required to interact in ways demanded by the instructor.

The core of our study involved interviews and focus groups with students and community partners about their collaborative practices throughout the course of the project. Nine of the class's twenty-two students volunteered to participate in our interview conversations, and two community partners agreed to post-project interviews about their perspectives on students' digital and face-to-face (F2F) communications during the project. Six students participated in individual interviews with us, and the remaining three-student team met with us in a focus group setting. Questions (listed in

Appendix, Table 1) were grouped into three major categories: 1) initiating contact with community partners; 2) using technology to collaborate with partners and with each other; and 3) reflecting on engagement perspectives in general. Our interest in digital writing led to questions specifically about the benefits and challenges of online collaboration tools like Google Docs, Doodle, and PBWorks. The lack of research on digital versus face-to-face collaborations in service-learning classes led us to ask students how they felt about working with their teams and community partners in online writing spaces versus in person.

Discovering Student Perspectives

We found through the interviews that students in Business Writing were aware of and interested in partner's needs—sometimes to a surprising extent. When asked what kind of feedback they hoped to receive from their community partner, many students expressed a desire to please them, and concern about disappointing them. One student-team designing a military letter-writing campaign for an on-campus department met with us altogether as a group and said the following statements about reciprocity:

- We're always open to constructive criticism. We want to think that they think it's a good idea. I don't think they've ever worked with a class before.
- Yeah, working with an organization involving so much money, it's great to see that we can work within their parameters.
- Basically, we want to make sure that we don't step on the toes of the people in charge at the [organization].
- If we push their boundaries, they'll probably shut down the whole thing.
- The people 'upstairs' need to know why it's useful and important to ask for donations [in this particular way].

At the start of this discussion, the students recognized that their organization had never participated in a service-learning partnership with students, which seemed to raise the stakes for this team. They expressed concern about taking up too much control, pushing boundaries, facing rejection, and successfully supporting their campaign idea. Another team similarly wondered whether their

campaign “was the right way to go” and hoped that their community partners “do think it’s actually going to work.”

However, most groups didn’t ask for feedback from their partners until their campaigns and reports were complete, or nearly complete. While this might initially seem like laziness or arrogance on the students’ parts, their reasons were much more complex. One student explained: “I want the Google Doc to be worth their time to look at, because I don’t want to ask them to read through stuff that’s not worth their time.” Similarly, a different student didn’t let his partner into the Google Doc because he didn’t “want to present anything to her that is not well-organized. Anything ‘south of email’ isn’t what I like to have with community members because I just don’t think it’s professional.” Speaking about Google Docs more generally, a third student said that he often feels nervous when people “watch you type or work on your project. It reveals your process and could make you feel self-consciousness about your writing skills.” We found it interesting that so many students expressed nervousness about showing in-progress work to community partners. These results suggest that students engaged in service-learning tended to recognize and defer to the authority of their community partners.

When it came to working with their community partners, the class overwhelmingly preferred F2F communication over digital. A main reason was logistical; after waiting several days for a response to their initial e-mail, two of the groups drove to the community partners’ sites to initiate their projects. One student explained that online interactions are often less productive than F2F meetings; when emailing, he noticed that you tend to get answers only to the specific questions you ask, whereas in F2F meetings, you can glean more information (especially about the tone of the place), as well as gauge the partner’s time constraints. Another reason was the perceived reciprocity of F2F communication; they found it easier to engage in a back-and-forth conversation in person than through e-mail. Central to our research was the suggestion that the students invite their community partner into their Google Docs or wiki to share feedback throughout the composing process. Yet there was a strong sense in our interviews that online communication should be reserved for the sharing of final products, not for collaborating

with community partners on works-in-progress. One team who created a video campaign for their organization explained it this way: “Working with them in person was critical at the beginning. After the video is done, it’ll be great to work via email and share the video link that way.” Despite our strong recommendation, not a single group invited their partner into their collaborative digital writing spaces. The main reason given was their preference for sharing a near-final product—an approach they thought would be more respectful of their partners’ time and a better reflection on the level of work they were capable of. Through choosing a less reciprocal communication style than what we had envisioned for them, they aligned themselves with professional writing models based on efficient, one-way, client-driven views of communication.

Hearing Community Perspectives

At this point, we were interested in knowing whether this model of engagement was preferred by community partners as well, so we followed up our research by conversing with two of the partners about their experiences with the class. We were specifically interested in whether the partners used the students’ projects, and whether the extent of their collaboration over the course of the semester played a role in their answer. These follow-up interviews evoked both positive and negative experiences with student communication, both online and in person. A less successful example was a project in which the students’ final product contained the wrong logo and incorrect statistics. The point person for the partner organization said, “Had they touched base a few weeks before, we could have changed some of those things.” She noted indifference from the students between touching base in person and over e-mail, suggesting that use of a collaborative space—or even a simple e-mail of an earlier iteration of the product—would have given her the opportunity to provide feedback that would ultimately make the final product useful to the organization. Since email and digital writing spaces like Google Docs are often more accessible to students than in-person site visits, this community partner didn’t understand the students’ hesitation to share work-in-progress. Digital collaboration tools like email or Google Docs could have helped the students sustain communication with the community partner throughout the course of the project, and ultimately develop a final product that would be useful to the

organization. We now recommend that instructors require in-process collaboration work as one best practice that could help promote more positive university-community partnerships in the future.

Another best practice that we recommend is early reference to past efforts and sustained projections into future possibilities with each community partner. Organizations sometimes have lengthy histories of collaboration with different university programs and departments, but these efforts often go undocumented and unshared. Especially in a student-initiated approach like ours, projects are lost if students, instructors, and partners have no established means of communicating their efforts across semesters and academic years. Most student teams emphasized a desire to be successful in their partnerships, but spoke very little about future iterations of their work. In fact, only one team project was designed to be adapted for future use by their partner. This team worked with an on-campus organization to create a Christmas letter-writing campaign for deployed soldiers. Two of the students on this team also worked as student-employees for this organization, making it easier for them to work collaboratively with their community partner and see their campaign to fruition. The team invited the partner to class on presentation day, which allowed our class to hear immediate response and feedback to that team's efforts. On the last day of class, this team shared with us a very positive report written by the community partner about the team's efforts, with the hope that similar campaign approaches might be attempted in the future.

We recognize that one of the reasons these students' project was successful was not as much their use of digital collaboration, but more their knowledge of the organization—a result of their having been student-employees for the partner. This longer-term understanding of their partners' needs helped them to create a useful, sustainable product. Because few students will have this past relationship with community partners, however, we recommend greater attention to providing students with knowledge about their partners and their past collaborations with the university. Moreover, if service-learning efforts are documented and shared with future instructors and community partners, an established record of community-university partnerships can facilitate more long-term collaborations. In the

conclusion that follows, we recommend one way that digital tools can support sustainable partnerships.

Creating Sustainable Collaboration Spaces

We believe that an active, shared digital space might assuage some of these challenges to sustainability. As we drafted this presentation collaboratively on Google Docs and PBWorks, we began to wonder what other collaborative online spaces might invite both university and community members “in” and give all groups access to shared updates on community-university collaborations. We are currently working to create an online “commons” space—a meeting ground for announcing needs and ideas, accessing helpful tools, initiating collaborations, and showcasing past projects and reflections. While our business writing course design sought to challenge the physical boundaries between the university and community by inviting community partners into the class’s physical and digital spaces, it remained the case that student-partner communication and project duration would be dictated by the university calendar. The remaining challenge of how to sustain service-learning projects past a given semester is, we believe, something that can be critiqued and challenged through the development of digital collaboration spaces shared by universities and community partners. Such spaces would challenge semester-based, university-controlled boundaries, allowing for more sustained and reciprocal communication.

Porter et. al.’s work on institutional critique provides us with a theoretical model for designing such an alternative “commons” spaces for university-community engagements. Here, we follow their suggestion to employ “boundary interrogation” to interrogate how institutions arrange themselves spatially, and how the temporal and spatial boundaries of our institution serve to maintain its power. Porter et. al. write that in current boundary-making, “the powerless have little or no ability to wield boundary power; they are normally excluded or marginalized from the process of boundary construction and maintenance. Further, we can acknowledge that the issues for the powerless, more often than not, are formulated by those in power and are based on how the empowered view the powerless and their ‘plight’” (624). We found that the power differentials discussed here were only partly challenged by our Business Writing course design;

while community partners did have control over defining the “issues” that would be addressed through the service-learning projects, they remained servants to the temporal boundaries of the university, namely its semester-based calendar and the transient schedules of graduate instructors who often teach courses like Katie’s business writing class. While our course design sought to challenge the physical boundaries between the university and community by inviting community partners into the class’s physical and digital spaces, it remained the case that student-partner communication and project duration would be dictated by the university calendar, as well as students’ willingness to share early drafts of their work. The remaining challenge of how to sustain service-learning projects past a given semester is, we believe, something that can be critiqued and challenged through the development of digital collaboration spaces shared by universities and community partners. Such spaces would challenge semester-based, university-controlled boundaries, allowing for more sustained and reciprocal communication. They would also, within a single service-learning course, provide students with the opportunity to access examples of past projects as well as give them an easily accessed space in which to share their works-in-progress with their instructors and community partners. One of our discoveries was students’ anxiety about sharing work in progress, but we hope that a departmentally sanctioned space for sharing drafts would assuage some of these concerns.

Of course, creating a shared online space does not always lead to *sustaining* a shared online space. At our university, we noticed that instructors and faculty are increasingly interested in community engagement. However, because they are incredibly busy (or in the case of graduate TAs, they lack a long-term investment in the local space), some instructors give up on service-learning before even trying it. By asking for materials and contacts from instructors and community partners, and placing those materials in a shared online space, we hope to provide a resource that will encourage more interested participation in sustained community projects. We hope instructors, administrators, students, and community partners will “enter” our shared online “commons” and update each other on challenges, concerns, ideas, and successes. We also hope other universities might follow our lead and create synchronous spaces that help instructors, departments, and community partners collaborate

over time. Often the major challenge to community engagement is a lack of communication between interested parties that results in projects that end with the semester. By observing service-learning practices in our department, and sharing those practices and efforts with future instructors and partners, we hope our university-community partnerships will grow more positive and sustainable.

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Appendix

Table 1. Student Interview Questions

We want to start by asking you some questions about working with communities:

- Can you tell us about your experience working with communities in high school and college?
- For this project, how did you choose a community partner to work with?
- How did you make initial contact with them?
- In your face to face meeting with your community partner, did you learn anything useful for your project in this class?
- How do you see this project meeting your partner's needs?

Now we want to talk more specifically about your use of technology in this project.:

- Can you tell us about your experience using Google Docs or Wikis before this class?
- In terms of working with your team, what do you think are the benefits of using Google Docs or your wiki?
- In terms of working with your team, what do you think are the challenges of using Google Docs or your wiki?
- Did you invite your community partner into your team's Google Doc or Wiki (i.e. collaborative digital space)? How did you invite them? How did they respond?
- Could you tell us a bit about how you foresee Google Docs playing a role in your communication with your community partner?
- What kind of feedback do you hope your community partners will give you? Have you asked them explicitly for this kind of feedback?
- How do you feel about working with them online versus in person?

Now we want to talk about how things are going with your project.

- Are you experiencing any challenges working collaboratively with your community partners?
- In this project, are you learning anything new about the community? working with others? the field of professional writing?

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