**Chapter 7**

**Nudging Academic Boundaries**

**Business Writing Students Partner with Not-for-Profit Agencies**

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**Abstract**

This article argues that the partnership between students and not-for-profit agencies extends students’ geographic and intellectual boundaries, applies business writing theory to practice, invests students with knowledge of community issues, and alerts them to business’s potential to contribute to community sustainability. Students learn how to partner with clients to create professional business documents, engage in a multiple-step collaborative-writing process, and author a letter requesting that a corporation also partner with the team’s agency.

The service-learning project drives the curriculum in my one-semester course, Advanced Writing for Business, at the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California. More than 50 agencies have partnered with upper-level students as the assignment has evolved over nine years.

The chapter explains how the teams select agencies and how the projects are assessed and offers recommendations for future service-learning projects. It argues that students learn more about critical thinking, corporate sustainability, the writing process, and how to create professional documents through these opportunities. Student teams produce documents that their agency needs: most commonly, a business plan, annual report, or press kit. In addition, each team creates a memo of understanding, progress memos, a formal report, an executive summary, a press release, a letter, a white paper, and peer- and self-assessments to increase their learning.

Quantitative and qualitative assessments by the agencies, students, and instructor indicate that these projects should continue. Student-learning about writing far exceeds less-experiential assignments, and students realize that business contributes to the community’s sustainability. The worth of the not-for-profit agencies’ documents, however, fluctuates. Some are not at the standard that they should be. Nevertheless, almost all of the agencies report that they would engage in another partnership.

*In many minds, the concept of school is to prepare you for the "real-world."  Well writing for a NFP was the real world.  It was the first time that I felt my writing had business value.  We weren't writing another paper to receive a pseudo-objective grade from one professor only to be discarded and never read again after the end of the class.  We wrote grants, which were documents that the California Science Center actually used to solicit donations in order to keep their business operational.*

*Working with a NFP as a client was both a motivator and a reward . . . . It was a client we wanted to see succeed at their mission and being able to contribute to that was just as rewarding as the grade we received on the project* (Christopher Luu, personal communication, July 9, 2007).

Christopher’s response, along with similar affirmative student reviews indicates that an assignment that partners my USC Advanced Writing for Business classes with local not-for-profits should continue. Although not all students embrace the extra work and stress associated with community-based learning as warmly as Christopher does, and although a few agencies have been disappointed by the quality of the students’ work, I continue providing this learning opportunity because I’m convinced that through faculty, agency, and student assessment, students and the community profit from this business writing partnership. Being nudged out of the classroom and into the community extends students’ geographic and intellectual boundaries; nudging students into business collaborations invests them with knowledge of community issues and of business’s potential to improve the world.

**Background**

All USC students must complete an advanced writing class, but they may choose the school in which they take the course. Consequently, although my class is offered in the business school, not all of the students are business majors or minors; some are from engineering, Letters Arts and Sciences, and the film school. Extending the goals for all Writing for Business classes—analyze audience and purpose, select the appropriate medium, create a variety of business documents (email, memos, letters, formal report, executive summary), and collaborate—I add learn how to create business documents for a not-for-profit, communicate with clients, and contribute to a community’s sustainability. Since 1999 when my students’ partnerships began, more than 60 agencies have collaborated with my students.

**Business Writing**

Every semester, the agency deliverables vary, but operations manuals, Board-of-Directors manuals, press kits, Web-site templates, grant-writing templates, and databases are the most commonly requested documents. One example of a less-typical project is when a team partnered with the USC Dental School’s mobile clinic students to create explanations and permission forms for parents of local elementary students. As a result of the partnership, parents who had previously ignored the free program agreed to permit the dental team to clean the children’s teeth. In another instance, a team designed a financial literacy module for teachers to use in a local elementary school.

**Procedures**

Initially the Director of Community Outreach disseminates my call for proposals to not-for-profit agencies prior to the beginning of the semester (Appendix A). Interested agencies respond with an email description of their mission and potential projects; I acknowledge and vet the responses.

On the second day of classes, my students read all of the proposals and sign up for one agency (four or five students per agency); I don’t choose the agency. Then I notify the agencies that weren’t selected and remind those that *were* selected to contact me with any questions or frustrations. Within a week, teams post an *internal proposal memo* to our multi-class discussion board and make arrangements to meet at the not-for-profit organization.

All members of the team must attend the agency meeting to tour the site, interview the contact person, establish dates for future meetings, determine a means to test the deliverables, and outline data the agency must provide for the students to generate a useful writing product.

Teams often discover that the internal memo prepares them only for the meeting’s discussion and rarely directs the project. After the meetings, each team drafts *a memo of understanding* that outlines the expected writing product and establishes dates for draft revisions, testing, and final acceptance (Appendix B).

This collaborative project also links to another required writing piece for all Advanced Writing for Business students, a five-to-six-page ethics article. My variation of the assignment requires students to recommend a partnership between a specific corporation and their not-for-profit agency.

**Project Intervention**

Because most projects falter at some point, a few students don’t complete their share of the work or some agencies are too busy to invest much time, so I provide a few interventions and safeguards to counter frustration and failure. Because the teams submit weekly progress memos, I’m aware of when they experience challenges.

If a student doesn’t contribute adequately, the teammates must negotiate (verbally and in writing) specific ways that the reluctant contributor may remedy the deficit. If s/he doesn’t accomplish certain tasks by a deadline, the team may fire the individual. This has happened only twice; the intervention generally persuades the student to contribute. In another kind of team meltdown, one student removed himself from a team that he didn’t feel worked conscientiously. In both types of cases, both the individual and team created projects for the agency.

Midway through the projects, I check with the agency to see how the process is working. If I’ve heard from a team that an agency contact has not been able to provide the data on time, I ask the agency to consider dropping the partnership. The two times this occurred, the agency increased its participation.

**Administrative Support and Encouragement**

Teaching at the USC’s Marshall School of Business fuels my engagement in these collaborations. The university’s vision statement outlines its commitment: “We will conduct a range of research and scholarship that advances knowledge and at the same time addresses issues critical to our community, the nation, and the world.” The Office of Community Outreach serves as an important clearinghouse, and USC funds community-based learning seminars and an award dinner for students, faculty, staff, and agencies. Its *Good Neighbors Program* has donated eight million dollars and thousands of talented volunteers to the near-by community since 1995. The Marshall School of Business supports my efforts by funding conference expenses and acknowledging my contributions.

**Multiple Assessments of Student Outcomes**

Multiple assessments measure the students’ learning and community value and provide a growing database for future studies.

*Students’ Response*. During all of these activities, students self-assess and assess one another’s teamwork through e-journals, conferences, and in their collective formal report. When they attend our mandatory conferences, we examine their written reflections, review the collaboration’s progress, and discuss their learning. The team’s final formal report describes the writing process, including experimental approaches, assessments, and recommendations for improving the process in future writing.

Their responses vary during the semester. Most express enthusiasm until the middle of the project when they begin to complain that the project takes too much time, teammates aren’t sharing the workload, or the agency doesn’t respond in a timely manner. At this time, we allocate time in one class for each student to sketch a pie chart and mark his/her own percentage of the team effort. Then teammates compare their participation allocations and create a team graphic that generally illustrates inequities. At the end of this session, they draft strategies to equalize participation, and include their charts and tactics in the week’s progress report.

At the end of the project, students rank themselves and one another on an assessment rubric that I provide. After the project is completed, most give it high marks. Semesters or years later, as the introductory paragraph to this chapter indicates, former students almost always refer to the community project as a high point in their undergraduate learning experience.

*Faculty Assessment*. I begin the assessments before the project takes shape. On the second or third day of class, I measure students’ feelings about collaborative writing, group projects, and community involvement. During the semester, I grade students’ collaborative pieces (internal memo and memo of understanding that clarifies each partner’s responsibilities, team presentation, agency’s deliverable, formal report) and individualwriting (progress-report memo, individual sections of the agency’s deliverable, individual sections of the formal report, an executive summary, press release, and a peer-and-self-assessment).

*Agency Assessment*. About three-quarters of the way into the project, the agency and students design a focus group or survey to test their deliverables. At the end of the project, agencies answer a few questions regarding the collaborative process and delivered product (Appendix C). Most who respond to my e-mail request are satisfied. A few applaud the students’ willingness to help the agency more than praising the actual deliverable. A few add that they’re glad to help students learn more about the community and professional writing. A couple of agencies had not received the deliverable, so I had to follow up with the students. Agency contacts who attend in-class presentations enthusiastically report that students’ contributions matter to the agencies and their clients.

*Post-project Assessment*. Recently, two student volunteers contacted the previous partner agencies where my students had worked. The agencies were asked if the agency had used the students’ writing product, if the students had responded professionally, and if the agency would consider a future collaboration. Generally the responses were positive, but many agencies knew nothing about the writing collaboration because the original contact person no longer worked at the agency. Several responders expressed a willingness to collaborate again, but their interest was frequently based more on the importance of students learning about the community than it was about the students’ ability to help the agency.

**Weighing Success**

At the end of every semester, I evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of the program and conclude that students successfully achieve the class’s outcomes because the projects nudge academic boundaries. They learn how to collaborate, produce professional documents, test writing strategies, impact community challenges, and work with a client.

Unplanned positive by-products of the class have resulted from these collaborations: three previous students have written to tell me that they chose jobs in the not-for-profit sector; several others have informed me that they’re thinking of such a career, and some have indicated that civic engagement is one criterion on which they assess for-profit companies. Additionally, students have been invited to join Boards of Directors at the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Jo’s Gym, and the African Millennium Foundation.

Most of the agencies receive useful business documents, meet responsible young adults, and increase awareness of their mission and the community’s needs.

Significantly, several scholarly studies support my sense that these projects increase critical thinking skills as well as creating business documents. Investigators Janet Eyler, Dwight E. Giles Fr. and John Braxton measured student learning associated with community service and academic study when they examined 1500 students at twenty colleges and universities. They conclude that service-learning was “the only significant or best predictor” of two student outcomes…the capacity of students to see problems as systemic, and the ability to see things from multiple perspectives” (Deans, 2000, p. 3).

Franklyn Salimbene, Anthony Bueno, Vicki Van Steenberg Lafarge, and Aaron Nurick (2005) argue that extending students’ classroom learning to serve the community “enables students to move from theory into application, from *learning about* [business writing] in the relatively safe confines of the classroom to actually *learning from* the application of classroom concepts to their direct experience” (p. 336, authors’ italics).

**Recommendations**

To increase experiential learning and further assist communities, our community-based projects must improve and expand. To increase participation, however, faculty and administrators need to see more assessments showing that these partnerships increase learning. For example, faculty and administration teams should survey former students to measure learning from a post-graduate perspective. Additionally, professional academic associations and national assessment institutions should increase research and reports on the efficacy of community-based projects’ assessment.

Increased community and university publicity should showcase success stories. Such publicity would invite more schools, agencies, and students to participate and encourage potential university students to select the university that best provides them with community-based learning opportunities.

Specifically in the USC Advanced Writing Program case, students should know which writing courses include these projects *before* they register for classes so they can choose or avoid a class that engages in community-based learning, depending on their interests and commitment levels.

Perhaps a class focusing on community-based partnerships could be offered as an interdisciplinary elective accepted by several schools. Business, architecture, and public policy strike me as particularly suited for such collaboration.

Finally, the world’s interdependence demands that we consider more global partnerships—certainly our business students will be better equipped to contribute to the corporate and not-for-profit world if they have a deeper understanding of international issues and needs.

As Christopher reports in the introductory email, nudging academic boundaries profits students; that nudge also enriches universities, local not-for-profit agencies, and global communities.

**Appendix A**

**CALL FOR PROJECTS**

Professor Sandra Chrystal, Associate Professor in the USC Marshall School of Business Center for Management Communication, seeks collaborative writing projects for the Fall 2007 semester. These projects allow advanced writing students to study real-world situations and problems, *to provide a business document* for the agency, and to offer analyses and suggestions in the form of detailed written reports and oral presentations. Participating non-profit agencies can use these deliverables in program development. Students learn more about a not-for-profit business, business writing, and corporate responsibility.

Projects vary greatly. Students will assess your writing needs and offer a preliminary proposal memo. After the team and you agree on the deliverables and the due dates, the team will provide the research and writing that you have agreed on.

Past projects have included:

* Press kits
* Training manuals
* Job descriptions
* Grant writing data base and templates
* Instructions for parents to complete school forms

Organizations can submit specific projects or propose general, *writing-related projects* and ask students to develop solutions.

Organizations requesting help must provide a contact to meet with students at least three times during the semester: the week of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. An organization representative will also be asked to attend the final project presentation and must assess the project and the professionalism of the team members.

The assignment requires the students to prepare written products for the agency and a report of the process for class; no physical labor, fundraising, or volunteer assistance will be provided. Organizations have ownership of the writing materials and can use them as appropriate.

**Fall project writing needs should be submitted by August 15, 2007.** The Spring 2008 semester begins in early January, and project proposals will be required by January 10.

Please provide a brief, one-paragraph description of your organization, a list of potential writing project(s), and the contact’s name and telephone/email.

Please submit requests to Sandra Chrystal, Center for Management Communication, USC Marshall School of Business/ MC # 0444/ LA, CA 90089-0444, (213)740-5011 or email: chrystal@marshall.usc.edu.

**Appendix B**

**Memo of Understanding between team and agency**

**MEMO**

To: African Millennium Foundation

CC: Sandra J. Chrystal

From: Marshall Students for the Development of Africa, Class Section #66718

Date: September 5, 2006

Subject: AMF Marketing Plan for Investment Package

**Agreement:**

After meeting with you last Friday, September 1st and discussing the current needs of the foundation, we plan on benefiting your agency by providing you with an interactive investment package marketed toward potential investors.

**Background:**

AMF is a not-for-profit organization whose existence and operations are based on the idea of microcredit, a process that enables individuals throughout the countries of Africa to borrow capital and to establish a business despite their dismal poverty. This capital comes from investors, who invest a given amount and receive payments in return with interest.

AMF is currently in need of a direct, interactive link between potential investors/lenders and their clientele, entrepreneurs in poor regions of Africa that possess the skills but not the financial funds to start a proper business. This means of communication will give investors the opportunity to identify whom and where their investment will be distributed to. It will also provide the entrepreneurs the chance to voice their needs.

**Objectives:**

Most importantly, we hope and expect our work to have an immediate positive impact on the African Millennium Foundation and thus, the entrepreneurs in Africa. Specifically, we believe that the investment package we create will attract individuals and corporations worldwide. In addition, as students in Marshall, we hope to improve upon our business writing skills while gaining invaluable experience working on a consistent basis with businesspeople from the agency.

**Deliverables:**

We will provide the agency with a marketing plan that outlines the specifics of the investment package. The investment package will outline the business details that a potential investor would want to know prior to investing in the foundation. It must address how AMF can protect itself and its investors from unpredictable events like natural hazards and disasters. It will also explain how often and by what means investors will receive updated reports, and also the appropriate rates and terms regarding individual investments. Lastly, it should include the guidelines to invest money, the return periods on the invested loans, the amount of interest awarded to the investors, policies on lenders ending their investment prior to maturity, and an explanation regarding the tax implications of investing in this not-for-profit organization.

**Roles, Responsibilities, and Deadlines:**

We have drafted a timeline that we plan to strictly follow in order to complete our assignments on time and in an efficient manner. We will be sending you progress reports on a weekly basis via e-mail to update you with the development of our work. In addition, we will be continuously providing you with drafts of our work as we feel like we can best meet the foundation’s needs if we receive constant input from employees at the agency. Lastly, we will maintain telephone contact with you and will meet personally with you on the days agreed upon, and additionally as needed.

**Stakeholders’ Benefits:**

The following lists the stakeholders in this project and in what way each will benefit:

1. ***African Entrepreneurs***: The entrepreneurs will benefit directly from the investments. With the funds received, they will have the opportunity to start a proper business that’s based on providing services and products using their skills and talents.
2. ***African Millennium Foundation***: The agency will benefit as they will now have an interactive link between the entrepreneurs and potential investors. For the good of AMF, this will hopefully result in a higher rate of investment and lending.
3. ***MSDA***: We will benefit greatly from this project as it will give us valuable experience writing business documents and interacting with professionals in the business industry. In addition, we will benefit personally from the gratitude we receive knowing that we are helping the entrepreneurs in Africa.

**Appendix C**

**Agency Assessment**

Thank you for your willingness to collaborate with my Advanced Writing for Business students this semester. They learned a great deal about the xxxx program, how to conduct research, improve teamwork, and create professional written documents.

We’d appreciate it if you would invest a few more minutes responding to these questions:

 What were your goals?

 Did the team achieve the outcomes that you desired?

 How do you evaluate the process?

 How do you evaluate the usefulness of the deliverables?

 How do you evaluate the contributions and professionalism of the student participants:

Student A

Student B

Student C

Student D

Please recommend whatever you think would improve future collaborations.

Indicate whether you would want another student team to collaborate with you.

Thanks, again, for your time.

**References**

Deans, Thomas. (2000). *Writing partnerships: Service-learning in composition.* Urbana, Il: National Council of Teachers of English.

Eyler, Janet S. (2000).What do we most need to know about the impact of service-learning on student learning? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning.* Special Issue on Strategic Directions for Service-Learning Research, 11-17.

Salimbene, F. P., Bueno, A.F., Van Steenberg Lafarge, V., & Nurick, A. J. (2005). Service-learning and management education: The Bentley experience. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 4.3, 336-344.

**About the Author**

**Sandra Chrystal**, **PhD,** is Director and Associate Professor, Clinical, Center for Management Communication, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California. Dr. Chrystal teaches Advanced Oral Communication in Business: Using 21st Century Technologies to Achieve Strategic Goals; Advanced Writing for Business; Communication Strategy for Business; and Public Communication in Ethics and Research for the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California (USC). She also teaches ethics modules for the Leventhal School of Accounting at USC and introductory ethics micro seminars for freshman orientations.

She has taught at USC since 1999. Prior to working at USC, Dr. Chrystal taught at the University of Notre Dame, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Clayton State College & University.

Dr. Chrystal has received several teaching awards, including Teaching Has No Boundaries (2006 first-place winner, 2002 finalist), the 2007 Good Neighbor Faculty Award, and the 2007 Evan C. Thompson Teaching and Learning Innovation award for the Marshall School of Business.

Dr. Chrystal currently serves as a member on several USC Committees, including the Committee for Academic Programs and Teaching, Technology Enhanced Learning and Distance Education, Blackboard Faculty Advisory Committee, the Community Based Learning Collaborative, and the Marshall Faculty Evaluation Committee.