English 402: Technical and Professional Writing

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Course Description

This course design offers an innovative approach to using client-based projects (CBPs) in technical and professional writing. It shows how teachers can incorporate CBPs in hybrid or fully virtual instruction, adapt it for a quarter or semester, and tailor it to meet students' needs. The course introduces students to and develops their skills in workplace writing, including, "[in] some cases … simply learning that a client company maintains common styles and strategies for all written work" (Wojahn et al. 132). While there are standard writing assignments, such as letters, memos, progress reports, and job application materials, other writing activities assigned depend on the CBP. These projects can involve creating operation manuals, employee handbooks, event planning guides, rewriting gaming instructions, summarizing scientific reports, producing website content, and/or compiling annotated bibliographies. The CBPs' topics vary as well, ranging from distillery operations to seed funding to grant writing.

Many college educators have incorporated CBPs in their courses (Balzotti and Rawlins; Blakeslee; Kreth; Lopez and Lee), in part because a client-based approach allows "students [to] address workplace issues by interacting with real clients in an effort to provide learners with more realistic tasks and environments" (Balzotti and Rawlins 141). Professionals from nonprofit organizations, businesses, co-ops, coworking spaces, government agencies, etc. can become the students' "clients," and the clients task students with completing writing projects needed for the workplace. According to Melinda L. Kreth, CBPs "[help] students … understand and respond effectively to 'real world' clients and their organizational contexts" (52). Students are introduced to a variety of genres and content, some of which might differ from what they learned in their college courses. CBPs also expose students to how client relationships work and often provide unforeseen challenges that become opportunities for learning and strengthening students' communication skills.

The technical and professional writing course at Washington State University, Tri-Cities (WSUTC) is a required course for undergraduates with junior standing who major in business, computer science, engineering, management, education, and other related fields. The course also fulfills a requirement for English majors specializing in rhetoric and professional writing and satisfies the University Common Requirement (UCORE) of writing communication. The undergraduate catalogue describes the course as "[research] writing: defining,

proposing, reporting progress; presenting a final product; other professional writing needs" (Washington State University Catalog).

Though not all sections of technical and professional writing integrate CBPs, such a course is an ideal location for CBP integration because it serves a diversity of majors, has broad course goals, and has flexible enough learning outcomes to support client work. First, CBPs foster students' different talents and abilities and provide different ways to improve communication skills, allowing students to pursue their writing interests across a range of disciplines. In addition, juniors and seniors greatly benefit because CBPs can open possible networks, give students the kind of experience that they can add to their resumes, and/or pave the way for internship opportunities or employment.

Secondly, this course has broad enough goals to support CBP integration. This course was designed around three such broad goals:

- composing in professionally appropriate modes;
- understanding professional obligations and ethical behaviors in diverse situations;
- and working individually and collaboratively.

Finally, the learning objectives for each goal are flexible, thus providing both instructor and student with an open framework for pursuing client-based work (The learning objectives are listed in the additional materials).

Institutional Context

Started in 1946 as a single campus to meet the educational needs of Hanford, WA workers tasked with producing the first nuclear reactor during World War II, Washington State University Tri-Cities (WSUTC) became "one of the six campuses of the [WSU] system" in 1989 ("About"). The campus offered graduate-level engineering programs along with the University of Washington and Oregon State University (Haynes). It continued meeting the needs of a diverse population by increasing academic programs, expanding the campus, and welcoming undergraduates in 2007. The campus has "grown to comprise 1,841 students, six academic colleges featuring more than 50 undergraduate and graduate programs, more than 90 full-time faculty and approximately 50 adjunct faculty—each semester" (Haynes). WSUTC's collaborative relationship with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) and the US Department of Energy (DOE) have offered "hands-on educational experiences that lead to career opportunities," and have employed "more than 800 WSU alumni … as scientists, engineers, and other professionals" ("WSU Tri-Cities Research"). PNNL and DOE's partnerships with WSUTC have proven advantageous, offering numerous internship opportunities for engineering majors. Internships for liberal arts majors were not widely publicized. The

English department's designated internship course, for instance, did not have a formal structure for English majors, and enrolled students mostly worked internally for another English faculty member or for the campus.

My early searches for local and regional employment for students through existing relationships with professionals in the Tri-Cities area, opened up both conversations across disciplines and internship opportunities for students. I also partnered with Career Services and streamlined a formal organizational structure for internship placement and completion, which helped generate student interest. Internship information resulting from this effort appeared in WSUTC's website, offering internship opportunities not only for English majors but also for majors without a designated internship course or for students who had expressed interest in technical writing. Eventually, the program added departments with designated internship courses to the list of growing opportunities for potential student-interns. In addition, I volunteered at a local coworking space, which houses multiple small businesses. My work at the space contributed to the program's success and led to building relationships with a diverse group of professionals.

This broad, local network made it possible to pilot CBPs in the technical and professional writing course. Because internships depend on availability and because students cannot always find a position whenever they desire, the CBPs offer a similar "hands-on" experience where students apply classroom knowledge to real-world problem solving.

Theoretical Rationale

Experiential and situated learning theories (Brent; Jacobs; Lave and Wenger; Kolb and Kolb; Relles; Stein) informed the course structure and writing assignments. Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb describe experiential learning in very broad terms as "[operating] at all levels of human society from the individual, to the group, to organizations, and to society as a whole" ("Experiential Learning Theory as a Guide" 11). Because of this capaciousness, this theoretical framework at least confluences with internship-related work. It offers guiding principles for designing immersive learning spaces in authentic contexts. Both approaches:

- understand student learning as taking place within an immersive learning environment where they acquire knowledge through hands-on experience and social interaction.
- see knowledge application as occurring within that same real-world context.
- call for adaptability in various situations (Kolb and Kolb, "Learning Styles and Learning Spaces" 194). By connecting students with

professionals, it immerses them into workplace culture and requires that they adapt to real-world situations by managing projects, developing written documents, working in teams, and communicating with diverse audiences.

- recognize learning as a holistic process involving authentic contexts and concrete experiences. Its holistic process "[provides] conceptual bridges across life situations" (Jacobs 50).
- necessitate a unique learning space that "[extends] beyond the teacher and the classroom" (Kolb and Kolb, "Experiential Learning Theory" 48).

The physical classroom does not have to limit what instructors and students can do; instead, students' experiences and social interactions should (Kolb and Kolb 47). Kolb and Kolb describe learning spaces as "[communities] of practice" fostered, in this course, through collaborative writing assignments. The scaffolding and sequencing of assignments guide students toward completion of the CBPs. Some assignments require students to work individually to develop self-management skills and hold themselves accountable. Other assignments require students to work collaboratively, building team skills and being held accountable by group members.

As Doug Brent has found, "Situated learning suggests that highly context-dependent skills ... are best learned—perhaps can only be learned—when learners are immersed in the real context in which such skills must be performed on a daily basis" (400). As such, the different types of assignments and CBPs prompt students to apply a variety of specialized skills, including problem solving, goal setting, decision making, and leading. The development of specialized skills through high-impact practices, such as project-based and integrative learning, allow learning from experience to occur (Jacobs 50-51).

Course Structure

The course's overall structure creates a learning space that extends beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom. It situates students in a workplace environment that involves primary stakeholders, individual accountability, and team cooperation. CBPs place emphasis on stakeholders and users, urging students to constantly consider the target audience. As Patricia Wojahn et al. point out:

> With a real audience for their projects, students can learn first-hand the complexities of analyzing an audience and the audience's interests and needs. They can also learn the provisional nature of audience requests, since feedback from clients during a given project may indi-

> cate evolving expectations and interests—a frustrating but common experience. (136)

CBPs make an audience-focused environment possible, and previous research clearly outlines how to structure a course to adapt a client-based approach (Balzotti and Rawlins; Blakeslee; Burnthorne et al.; Kreth). These authors share their experiences planning and executing CBPs and advise careful consideration of course goals and learning objectives. They also guide readers through the process of finding suitable projects and dynamic clients. Client involvement is paramount as it fosters social interaction among the instructor, peers, and clients. They contribute to the unique learning space and community-building in the classroom environment. As a "community of practice," the classroom becomes a "safe" space where students can make mistakes and learn from them. Students do not experience the same accountability as they would in the workplace: they do not run the risk of losing their jobs and clients do not run the risk of losing money. Even so, the space "[exposes] students to workplace writing practices as well as to the activity systems of particular workplaces" and it offers more support and flexibility than a standard workplace (Blakeslee 176; 183).

The course structure involves clients throughout the learning process and helps build student-client relationships. It includes client meetings, team planning meetings, review sessions, and presentations. During the first two weeks of the course, clients meet students and introduce their projects. To prepare for client meetings, students and the instructor discuss possible questions, such as "What are the project's deliverables?" and "Who are the users of the project or who is it intended for?" At this point, the instructor should also gain a clear sense of client projects and in order to guide students through these planning discussions. The amount of time students spend on projects depends on its size. Students can complete small projects in 1-2 weeks, medium projects in 3-6 weeks, and large projects over the entire semester (Lopez and Lee 175). Throughout the semester, students learn about standard course content, such as project management, document design, resume and cover letter writing, and professional correspondence in tandem with project-specific content (e.g. procedural writing or reporting). Product reviews occur at least a week or two prior to submission of the final product. Clients participate in product reviews, which are explained in the next section.

Writing Assignments

The following major assignments—the client assessment, work plan, and product review—prepare students for the final presentation. The assignments demand students develop core competencies necessary in project manage-

ment by offering an authentic experience in a real-world context. The client assessment, submitted individually during the third week of class, is the first step toward managing the project assigned. After the client meeting, students show their understanding of the project by discussing its purpose, target audience or users, and deliverables. They also explain the project's relevance to the course goals, and they can add questions for the client or the instructor. The assessment helps ensure that all students understand the client and instructor's expectations before proceeding to the next step in the learning process.

Students submit the second major assignment, the work plan, during the fourth week of class. The work plan requires team planning and collaborative writing. It also requires students to make decisions and arrive at consensus. It takes them through a series of steps in project management. First, students agree on each group member's role and responsibilities, such as assigning a team leader, a communications person, and an editor. Second, they decide how and when the team will communicate. Students also schedule additional group meetings outside of class time. Next, they set their team goals by dividing the project's tasks and describing how and when members will accomplish each task. More importantly, each group member initials the work plan, indicating they reviewed, understood, and agreed to it.

For the third assignment, the product review, each group member writes a one-page memo. The product review differs from traditional peer review because it relies on usability testing or involves the project's target users. Ideally, the reviewers are people who will use the document and can include employees, volunteers, customers, or community members. For example, the editor of a community paper assigned students to write interview questions for a list of businesses. The editor reviewed each group's draft and provided written feedback. Students also make arrangements to observe users as they interact with the draft, and then, to interview users afterward, asking about strengths and points of confusion. For instance, one CBP had students rewrite gaming instructions for a nonprofit, and other students—acting as product review groups—played the games using the new instructions. One or two group members were charged with observing game play and taking notes on reviewers' reactions, questions, and concerns.

After product review sessions, team members compare notes and discuss problem areas. In their memos, each student summarizes the results of the usability test and explains how they will proceed with revisions. Similar to the client assessment, the memo helps the instructor ensure all students understand how to move forward with their team's project. One or two weeks before students submit the final product, they present their work to the clients and the instructor. The presentation's limited audience helps create an authentic experience. The classroom turns into a boardroom, where students choose

to use the physical space to their advantage (e.g. by rearranging the desks to form a "roundtable"). Students prepare a 10- to 15-minute presentation, begin with introductions, showcase features of their work, and gather feedback from clients to make any last-minute changes. They then submit the final product on the last day of class (or of finals week).

Critical Reflection

Four significant realizations have emerged throughout several adaptations of this course design. First, the course structure fosters an immersive learning space when using different CBPs that call for certain skills. Second, the learning space reflects a workplace environment, where responsibilities, policies, and expectations change frequently. Third, the learning space is not confined to the classroom; educational infrastructure expands to public, community spaces. Fourth, working with nonprofit organizations makes learning through experience invaluable and provide opportunities for community involvement.

Immersive Learning

Instead of covering a variety of topics, such as writing technical reports or progress reports, proposals, and procedures, students focus on specific skills and genres in an immersive learning environment. A diversity of CBPs demand the course content change, including readings, lectures, and class activities, with the awareness that course goals are not jeopardized. They allow students to practice in-depth work on a set of skills rather than immediately moving from one lesson to the next. The content in one course section, for instance, focused on strategically reading, summarizing, and designing documents. A company requested a maximum 2-page fact sheet, summarizing Hanford's cleanup proposals and writing instructions on how the public can comment on and view relevant documents. The students reviewed an example proposal and fact sheet, identifying important sections and features. They also read Elizabeth Tebeaux and Sam Dragga's chapters "Designing Documents" and "Designing Illustrations" in *The Essentials of Technical Communication* to guide them through the examples and their own writing. In another course section, the content focused on writing "how-to" instructions. A distillery requested an operation manual for new employee training, a safety guide, and a production guide, and a coworking space requested an event planning guide for employees. To learn the basics of writing instructions, the students read both Tebeaux and Dragga's chapter "Instructions, Procedures, and Policies," "Creating Rhetorically Effective Instruction Manuals" in *Writing Commons* and select chapters from David McMurrey's *Online Technical Writing*. Each group also researched additional information about the document-type specific to their CBP. When students ran into problems or had questions,

the group's communications person contacted the instructor or client to ask for clarification or resources. Because some of the content is specific to each group's project, immersive learning requires students taking initiatives to learn content beyond the lessons facilitated in class.

Adaptable Learning

CBPs require the instructor and students to adapt to various situations through problem-solving and decision-making (Kennedy et al. 148). Students may have difficulty adjusting to a client-based curriculum, particularly if they are "[accustomed] to more traditional assignments or pedagogical approaches" (Balzotti and Rawlins 141). CBPs do not come with assignment sheets that overview the project and detail its requirements. Thus, the instructor needs to play an advisory role while students determine how to approach the project assigned, find potential users for product reviews, and manage communication between clients and group members. As Wojahn, et al. point out, "Collaborative teams have been found to work particularly well for solving complex problems" (131). A nonprofit organization, for example, tasked one group with creating a guide on writing grant proposals. Students needed to include a template for a short, introductory letter, a Letter of Intent, and a Frequently Asked Questions page. They started by gathering content from their client and researching how to write and design the requested documents. The team also took initiative to learn about the nonprofit's history, as well as the guide's purpose, usefulness, and intended audience. Managing communications and preparing product review sessions tested students' audience awareness. When delayed communication became problematic, students realized the chaotic schedules of their clients and managed their time around client availability. Students also learned to use software that their clients used to communicate, such as the team messaging application Slack. Course evaluations showed students finding ways to adapt to their peers' busy schedules. When their schedules conflicted, teams used video conferencing to hold meetings outside of class. In addition, students contacted appropriate users for product review sessions. For one project, students collaborated with their client's employees for the "how-to" guide they created. For another project, students asked roommates, friends, and family members to participate as target users of their document which included the general public. Adaptable learning necessitates that students become agents of their own learning, and with that, they learn through experience.

Educational Infrastructure

A stable educational infrastructure requires a space dedicated to learning and furnished with useful resources that help foster learning. The implementation

of CBPs in the classroom modify the space and its structure, as explained in the previous section. For a client-based approach to work, infrastructure cannot just be confined to the classroom and the institution with social interaction between the instructor and peers. It needs to spread into public, community spaces. The institutional context described earlier and instructor engagement with outside professionals or volunteers in community spaces helps build bridges between the university and outside stakeholders. For instance, I needed to build a professional network to make CBPs an option in the technical and professional writing course. It first involved using the resources available and developing programs within the university (e.g. collaborating with Career Services, streamlining internship placement and completion, increasing student awareness and interest, and finding internship opportunities). The network became a major part of the course infrastructure, bringing the type of authentic, concrete experiences students gain from internships into the course. These relationships are what make the course immersive, adaptable, and a part of a real-world context.

Community Work

Nonprofit organizations add value to the learning experience and allow students to do community work. Lopez and Lee recommend instructors work with nonprofits because they "make particularly good clients … Nonprofits expose students to alternative business philosophies and marketing methods … build skills such as working with no or very small budgets, and can get students involved in a project that touches them personally" (174). One client, the editor of the community newspaper *Tumbleweird*, first asked students to draft interview questions for her to use when interviewing small, local businesses in the area. The client planned to help the city's small businesses by featuring one in each monthly publication. The project, lasting about 4-5 weeks, introduced students to the realities of running and maintaining a local publication that relies on community funding and support. The project also required students to get to know community members by researching the businesses and contacting owners. As Wojahn, et al. note, "Opportunities to work for a real client allow students to begin recognizing the ways in which organizations are communities with their own networks, norms, language, and rituals" (132). Students learned how to create thoughtful, open-ended questions that invited informative responses from business owners or employees to help increase the public's interest. The client contributed to students' efforts by reviewing each group's draft of interview questions and offering written feedback.

The same client, also the co-founder of a gaming organization, tasked students with a second project. Her organization hosts events where families

can play different types of board games provided. The client asked students to rewrite gaming instructions for multiple card games, adult board games, and children games to make the instructions accessible. She also wanted to translate the students' instructions into Spanish and Russian for multilingual families. The client provided all board games, which made it easy for students to review the traditional instructions by playing the games, and later, use other groups to review their new instructions through game play as well. Students learned how to simplify complex language and sentence structure for certain audiences. Students expressed their appreciation for this project when interviewed for the campus newsletter (Murray).

Challenges and Future Outlook

This course design exposes students to many different fields and introduces them to professional cultures, but there is room for improvement. A future design of this course would: 1) allow internal clients to participate; 2) provide small or medium CBPs to allow time for other course-related tasks and lessons, such as resume and cover letter writing; and 3) find recording software that grants flexibility, particularly for clients who cannot visit the classroom.

External clients are ideal because they offer a realistic internship-related experience in which students work with professionals outside of the university. However, one of the challenges of CBPs includes finding external clients and coordinating schedules, visits, and communications. Recruiting colleagues as clients, including faculty, staff, or administrators, can ease accessibility and involve students in projects relevant to their education, such as writing departmental documents or student handbooks. In a different English course, for example, a History professor assumed the client-role and asked students to create a brochure for those interested in pursuing a history degree. The professor's proximity and availability allowed immediate communications and manageable classroom visits. Internal clients also give students insight into the type of workplace writing that departmental leaders, staff, and administrators do.

Whether recruiting internal or external clients, large projects can take the entire semester to complete (Lopez and Lee 175) and with unforeseen challenges, they can limit the amount of time spent on other content or lessons. Instead, small or medium CBPs leave room for other course-related content not directly connected to the CBPs. Lopez and Lee's "Five Principles for Workable Client-Based Projects: Lessons from the Trenches" offer examples of small, medium, and large CBPs. Students can complete small projects in 1-2 weeks or medium projects in 3-6 weeks. A medium CBP worked well in one section where the client tasked students with creating annotated bibliographies for scientific reports. Such medium projects left room for one or two days of weekly class time dedicated to CBP work, and course evaluations revealed that

students were grateful for that time. (For those teaching in the quarter system or 6 to 12-week summer sessions, my sense is that large projects can still work well in those contexts.)

Recording software, such as Panopto or Zoom, gives clients and instructors flexibility. For instance, instructors can record clients introducing projects, answering previously written student questions, or offering summative feedback. Instructors can assign students to watch recorded videos asynchronously, while dedicating class time to other work. Recording software also can decrease the amount of time the instructor and clients spend on giving students feedback. Moreover, recordings can also replace written feedback, potentially increasing the level of comprehension by avoiding unclear written feedback. Just as importantly, students have increased flexibility for accessing course materials, revisiting client meetings, rewatching and processing feedback, and even improving presentation skills by returning to recordings of "boardroom" meetings. Taking advantage of the software available and accessible can assist the instructor and clients when presenting information, and in turn, and can help students process information.

CBPs are valuable and make the hands-on experience afforded by internships accessible for all students, "[serving] as a bridge between the academic and workplace worlds" (Wojahn et al. 132). This pedagogical approach recognizes that learning does not only occur in the classroom but also outside of it (Sahlberg 339). Drawing from experiential and situated learning theories, this course design aims to bring the internship experience into the classroom. It shows how learning spaces can become immersive environments where authentic, concrete experiences allow students to see themselves as a part of a broader community network. Multiple elements of the course design make this possible. For one, the course structure and assignments prompt students to work on relevant and useful projects that people will use in a real-world context. In addition, the emphasis placed on audience allows students to see the value and consequences of their work. They realize, for instance, that if they write unclear instructions, the primary stakeholders and users cannot perform tasks or use the students' work. The students also learn to adapt to various situations, which is a necessary skill in the workplace. The clients, projects, and users present a different set of challenges, including the need to communicate with more than the instructor and peers and the need to prepare high-quality work for more than just the instructor to see. Finally, the learning space welcomes teachers beyond the instructor because students learn from clients. They can learn about different workplace environments and gain insight into expectations and experiences in contexts outside the classroom. Much like internships, client-based approaches provide access to additional educational resources, people, and opportunities for growth.

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