Incorporating Community-Engaged Pedagogy in Online Classes: Benefits, Challenges, and Strong Practices

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ABSTRACT

Community-engagement in virtual classrooms comes with unique benefits and challenges. Between 2018-2021, technical writing e-service-learning students from Indiana University East (Richmond, Indiana) raised a total of $149,239 through grant writing projects. This e-service-learning project gave students real-world experiences and opportunity to connect with local organizations, prompting one student to choose grant writing as a career. Many students were able to successfully obtain funding for their chosen nonprofits, giving students a sense of social responsibility.

Keywords: accessibility, e-service-learning, grant writing, online teaching, reflection

INCORPORATING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PEDAGOGY IN ONLINE CLASSES: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND STRONG PRACTICES

Community-engaged pedagogy—built on service-learning instruction linked to course learning outcomes—is an effective way to make students aware of and responsive to issues in their communities while putting theory to practice. Working with community partners in need of services is a useful way for students to become learners, citizens, and activists (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020). Incorporating community-engaged pedagogy in a virtual classroom comes with unique challenges, including difficulties involving online participation or miscommunication affecting community partners, issues with time commitments or scheduling, and technology access difficulties. Nonetheless, online community-engaged pedagogy has the power to provide real-world experiences for students, strengthen communications skills, and overcome geographical barriers. This research includes a literature review on e-service-learning, followed by examining a grant writing project from an undergraduate, online, asynchronous course.

Literature Review

Benefits of Incorporating Community-Engaged Pedagogy in Online Classes

Community and Society. Teaching serving-learning assignments is more than just an instructional method; when students become aware of and active toward the needs of organizations in their own communities, they often gain a sense of partnership, volunteerism, and empathy for an organization's cause and struggles. When students choose their community partner, they are given the opportunity to recognize local social issues, initiate community partnerships, or generate plans for improving their communities (Savini, 2019, p. 13). These types of community-engaged projects allow students opportunity for involvement in their community's unmet needs for matters such as poverty, social inequities, struggling businesses, and more (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020). Community-engaged

pedagogy increases students' motivation and intention to volunteer (Kapucu & Knox, 2011). When carefully planned and thoughtfully executed, community-engaged assignments positively impact student success and sense of moral development and social responsibility (Eyler et al., 2001). Placing these types of projects in a virtual environment, though, leverages 21st century skills and digital communication proficiencies.

Virtual Environment. Despite e-learning's nature often being entirely online, students can still succeed in the "community experience" that constructs service-learning activities and transfer learned knowledge from the class to real life. Bharath (2020) wrote that undergraduate students entering the nonprofit sector may need practical skills in addition to theoretical instruction. Community-engaged pedagogy and digital assignments can help develop these practical skills, including virtual presentations or digital composing—methods students might use to present information to their online class or community partner (pp. 74–75).

In additional to transferable skills, e-service-learning can also fill the void of hands-on classroom activities (meant for understanding of course content, application of knowledge, and practical experience) that are often omitted in an online classroom because of the virtual environment (Bharath, 2020, p. 75; Schneider-Cline, 2018, p. 1). Online students performing e-service-learning must form some self-sufficiency, collaborative skills in digital settings, troubleshooting dexterities (for technology and service-learning issues), and abilities to compose and present digital deliverables (Leon et al., 2017, p. 50). These technology skills also pertain to online communication.

Communication Online. E-service-learning offers students and community members a communication method rooted solely in technology. When there is consistent and advantageous communication during an online community-engaged project, this virtual service-learning can remove geographic barriers and create a sense of community (Stefaniak, 2020, p. 562). Community-engaged pedagogy taking place in an online setting also allows instructors to redevelop assignments, making service-learning accessible and approachable for a variety of students. Bharath (2020) expressed that e-service-learning "allows educators to connect distance students with opportunities that nontraditional students may not [otherwise] have such as work experience and networking opportunities" in ways that teach students 21st century skills through technology (p. 77). E-service-learning also sanctions learning while meeting community needs. It prepares students for today's workplace where digital dexterities are expected (p. 69).

Career Development Skills. As previously discussed, community-engaged pedagogy allows for practice of technology skills while gaining real-world experience. These types of projects can help students determine their compatibility with career roles and/or companies. In Becnel and Moeller's (2017) in-person library service-learning study, many students revealed the significance of the project helping them understand the nature of a library workplace and librarian tasks. Importantly, this opportunity to be in the workplace setting caused some students to reflect on whether this was a suitable career option for them. Some students, however, took this opportunity and expanded outside the bounds of the service-learning project by volunteering with other library tasks (like the bookfair) or by working other jobs in the school after building rapport at the library (pp. 61-62). The benefits (digital communication, virtual environment, community-building, career skills) of online community-engaged pedagogy are not limited to students; instructors and the institution can benefit too, as discussed below.

Benefits to Educators and the Institution. Through online community-engaged pedagogy, instructors may learn new teaching approaches and could use this knowledge for their own research or to track emerging trends. Additionally, in an online setting, instructors are refining online teaching and communication skills while still socially and professionally networking within the community. Class participation is strong, and instructors and students build solid relationships during e-service-learning (Bharath, 2020, pp. 66-67). Leon et al. (2017) found that instructors implementing service-learning curriculum established in themselves the learning outcomes they expected for their students—community building, reflective practices, critical engagement, and more (p. 40).

Furthermore, colleges and universities that support e-service-learning benefit from contributing to the overall wellbeing and positive effect in the community, country, or world—depending on where students are learning. These institutions also benefit from boosted enrollment, retention of students, and increased positive reputation in the community (Kapucu & Knox, 2011; Bharath, 2020, p. 67). Additionally, these institutions become eligible for national recognition and federal funding such as the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification and the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (Kapucu & Knox, 2011; Bharath, 2020, p. 67). Despite the benefits—digital communication, virtual environment, community-building, career skills, and benefits to teachers and the universities—that can be expected with online community-engaged pedagogy, there are obstacles that can emerge.

Challenges of Incorporating Community-Engaged Pedagogy in Online Classes

Although online community-engaged pedagogy can be advantageous to students' learning, instructors' professional skills, the universities, and community partners, there are challenges in this method of teaching. With the increase in online classes, instructional designers must find ways to produce authentic learning experiences for online platforms (Stefaniak, 2020, p. 562).

Participation. As with any class assignments, there may be students who do not complete work. This can be problematic in a service-learning assignment where community partners are relying on students' efforts (Bharath, 2020, pp. 73-74). In an online environment, students who do not communicate with their community partner, instructor, or peers miss out on the depth of learning and real-world experiences that e-service-learning can offer. Moreover, students may suffer technology issues beyond their control or a lapse in internet service that leads to lacking communication. Instructors must be aware of their students' challenges and adjust the course or assignments within reason to be supportive.

Course Design. An example of an adjustment instructors should prepare for is students who decide they are not comfortable with the idea of working with community partners. In this case, instructors should consider the possibility of the community-engaged portion of a project being optional and provide a hypothetical alternative where the instructor gives the student details for a hypothetical community partner to work with (Stone, 2005). Instructors still receive the same product, and students still apply theory to practice—however, no real community partner benefits from a student's efforts. Because a high level of self-direction and motivation is needed from students in e-service-learning, students who rely on firm course structure and instructor-guidance may struggle (Becnel & Moeller, 2017, p. 57).

Communication. Another area where students may struggle is with communication. Aside from technology issues or inconsistent access to computers or internet potentially

leading to deprived communication, other communication challenges (like scheduling conflicts or busy contacts) can ensue. Stefaniak (2020) concluded that miscommunication and lack of communication were common problems during community-engagement assignments (p. 565). Lack of communication leads to community partners being unaware of what students are doing. Instructors should instill the importance of strong communication so that all parties—students, community partners, and instructor—have a clear understanding of roles, needs (from both the student and community partner), project goals, and boundaries. It is also important (for the student and organization) that students have a specific and available contact person as their community partner so they can maintain communication with a person who is aware of the student's work (Stefaniak, 2020, p. 565). When students work with one person at the organization, it is easier for them to self-sufficiently communicate with this person rather than spending extra time and effort to get approval and ideas from multiple sources.

However, having a specific contact from the organization does not guarantee good communication and a positive service-learning experience for the student. Organizations may face their own obstacles—including time commitments, difference in goals or intentions, unwillingness to listen to students, change of mind, or replacement of the student's contact person—all of which affect students' experiences. Community partners must be prepared to commit time and energy into supporting students in their work with the organization. When both the student and community partner are invested and communicating well, they both reap the benefits of community-engaged pedagogy (Bharath, 2020, p. 68).

Time Commitment.

For Students and Community Partners. For students with busy schedules, investing in an online community-engaged project can be challenging. Students might feel as though the time-restraint of the semester or project is not long enough to complete the service-learning (Schneider-Cline, 2018, p. 14). Because students have professionals relying on them, the pressure and time commitment of staying in communication and sometimes working around the community partner's schedule can also be problematic for busy students. Time commitments can be problematic in online classes where some students may have inconsistent access to computers and internet. On the other hand, students with solid internet access can reply to emails and complete work on their own schedule, providing it meets the course structure and due dates. Community partners also face a time commitment when they work with a student to communicate needs and expectations, provide the student with material, and check in on the project.

For Instructors. The amount of time instructors invest in e-service-learning projects is also significant—although the benefits, as discussed earlier, are also considerable. Helping students secure community partners regardless of geographical location, maintaining connections with community partners and students, planning and teaching the material via technology, responding to individual students each involved in unique projects and situations, developing appropriate virtual opportunities for meaningful reflection, and grading projects are time-consuming necessities for the instructor that occur within the scope of online community-engaged pedagogy (Becnel & Moeller, 2017, p. 57; Bharath, 2020, p. 73; Schneider-Cline, 2018, p. 1). It is up to the instructor to ensure "students are prepared and willing to work on the project to the best of their ability, and address issues where poor student conduct, work ethic, and lack of professionalism and commitment may hamper the successful completion of a project" (Bharath, 2020, p. 68). Not only can this be labor-intensive for

the instructor, but it can be a controversial or sensitive situation to manage.

Drawbacks for Institutions. Students who fail to professionally present themselves or complete the project for their community partner not only face blemishes to their own reputation, but also that of their institution. Poor performance by students and/or instructors who are not motivated or trained to effectively implement this pedagogy can create a negative reputation for the university. If the university funds instructors to conduct failed service-learning projects, the university faces financial loss (Bharath, 2020, p. 69). It can also be challenging to work on a service-learning project within the time limit of a semester; if the partnerships dissolves before an outcome is achieved, it can blemish the community's view of the institution (Savini, 2019, pp. 11-12). This can cause uncertainty from the university regarding community-engaged pedagogy and may require an instructor's convincing and time to persuade the institution of the benefits.

Lack of Appreciation. Lastly, students should also feel as though the pedagogy and their work is worthwhile. Therefore, it is important that students feel appreciated for their work. Lack of appreciation can cause students to have poor impressions of e-service-learning. Community partners should show gratefulness for the time, effort, and work which students put into helping the organizations. Bharath (2020) claimed some students expressed negative feelings because they "felt used" by organizations—feelings that could be avoided if organizations merely write the student a formal thank-you note, give a verbal expression of gratitude, or another simple form of recognition like thanking the student in the organization's newsletter or social media platforms (p. 76). Feeling unappreciated for their work may leave students without the strong sense of civic partnership that comes from a positive service-learning experience. However, conveying to the community partner the importance of showing students appreciation can be a delicate matter for an instructor to request. There are also added challenges if the community partner is unsatisfied with a particular student's communication, work, or end-product.

Despite these challenges—communication, time commitments, course design—many of which are faced by both the students and the instructor, a successfully implemented online community-engaged project has the potential for many benefits. As discussed, these benefits include strengthening digital communication practices, taking down geographical barriers, establishing career skills, and building community among students and their local nonprofits and organizations. Below are some of the strong practices for implementing community-engaged pedagogy in an online class.

Strong Practices for Incorporating Community-Engaged Pedagogy into an Online Class

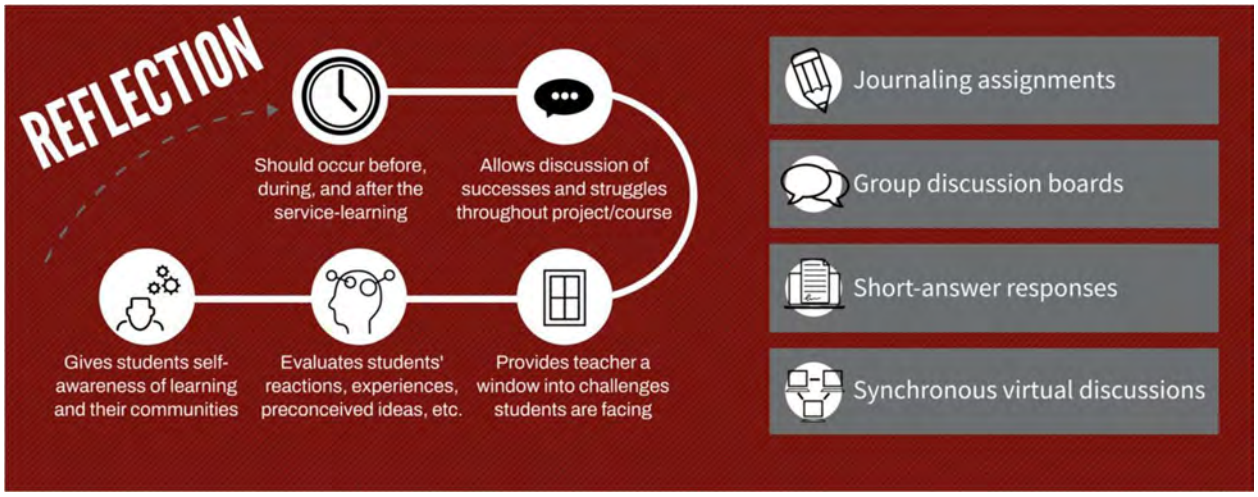
Reflection. Sources agreed that integrating a reflective component into a community-engaged project is effective for making service-learning—in online, in-person, or hybrid courses—meaningful for students and instructors. For example, during a community-engaged project, Savini (2019) incorporated weekly reflective writing assignments allowing students to discuss their achievements and struggles. This provided Savini with "a window into the challenges [students] faced" (p. 15). By procuring this weekly understanding of students' challenges, instructors can timely alter scaffolding, due dates, or other project components as needed to quickly address issues or provide support. Becnel and Moeller (2017) noted the benefit of students' weekly written reflection exercises in their service-learning course and stated the scaffolded weekly assignments and reflections "confirmed to us that each student was ready to move forward…[and] that they

were doing quality work" (p. 58). In Schneider-Cline's (2018) study, reflective journal writing benefitted students' self-awareness throughout the service-learning process (p. 15).

Veyvoda and Van Cleave (2020) noted reflection as being fundamental to service-learning: "Simply put, service-learning without reflection is not service-learning" (p. 1544). The authors describe reflection as a platform where initial reactions, previous experiences, preconceived ideas, and the complexity of social issues surrounding the project can all be explored through students' critical thinking (p. 1544). Reflection also gives students self-awareness to support them in transferring newly acquired skills and knowledge to other courses and situations beyond the classroom (Stefaniak, 2020, p. 564).

Meaningful reflection can be challenging to quantify. The four C's—*continuous, connected, challenging,* and *contextualized*—can serve as guiding framework (Eyler et al., 1996). Reflection should be *continuous*—happening before, during, and after the service-learning experiences. In the online classroom, these exercises might take on the role of written journals, group discussions boards, and/or short-answer responses. Service-learning should also be *connected* in the sense of academic and intellectual experiences (theory and practice). This ties into service-learning being *challenging* as students learn in a different manner than to what many students are accustomed (such as lectures) because service-learning allows room for real-world practice. Other challenges of e-service-learning that students may face include working with instructors and/or community partners despite distance and also refining digital communication skills. Lastly, service-learning should be *contextualized*—an opportunity to put skills to work while considering the needs of the community partner (Schneider-Cline, 2018, pp. 1-2). These concepts on reflection can be seen below in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Reflection



Note. Savini, 2019, p. 15; Schneider-Cline, 2018, p. 15; Becnel & Moeller, 2017, p. 58; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020, p. 1544; Stefaniak, 2020, p. 564; Bharath, 2020, p. 65

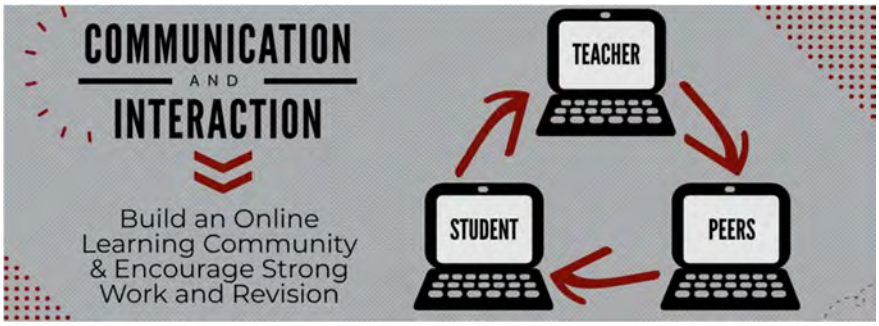
Communication. Important to student-reflection is strong communication with peers, instructors, and community partners (Bharath, 2020, p. 75). This is even more true in e-service-learning where distance serves as a barrier between students, instructors, and community partners. Veyvoda and Van Cleave (2020) pointed out that "Physical distancing does not have to mean disconnecting," but instructors may have to reconceive ways for all parties to stay in non-in-person contact while "preserving human connection" (p. 1548). When instructors, students, and community partners stay inclusive and regularly communicative through video conferencing, phone calls, or emails, they make their presence, roles, and intentions known.

Discussion with Peers. Creating space—virtual and temporal—where students can engage with peers is another robust communication practice for online community-engaged pedagogy. Although service-learning often takes place outside the classroom confinements, Becnel and Moeller (2017) explained that students should revisit the online class to share experiences with peers. The instructor can create space for interaction in areas like discussion boards or synchronous meetings. Students can learn from peers' experiences and benefit from seeing classmates' project progressions. According to Becnel and Moeller (and as seen in Figure 2), this interaction builds an online learning community which is important for strong and meaningful learning experiences (pp. 57-58). In a survey conducted by Leon et al. (2017) to recognize impacts of service-learning pedagogies on writing teachers, all participating instructors ranked "student's sense of community with each other" as a top teaching goal. One participant commented that students who do not develop a sense of community in the classroom do not take responsibility for their learning, but instead they "'operate as more of a freelancer, coming in to receive the service they paid for'" (p. 49). This participant explained that when community is created in a classroom, the duty of evoking student participation falls less on the instructor than on the peers. Thus, a sense of community among peers is important for a sense of responsibility and self-actualization in the learning process (p. 49).

Additionally, creating space for peers to interact and share progress throughout service-learning can encourage revision. An instructor from Leon et al.'s (2017) study stated that when peers interact and see each other's progress, revision happens more naturally without instructor-prompting because students often revise when seeing classmates' good work (pp. 50-51). In an online setting, revision or drafting stages might take place in the form of students' posting progress in a discussion board or presenting virtually to the class.

Figure 2

Communication and Interaction



Note. Becnel & Moeller, 2017, pp. 57-58

Reciprocity. Another strong practice for implementing online community-engaged pedagogy involves an understanding of reciprocity—the expectations between the student and their community partner. Bharath (2020) agreed with this notion of reciprocity—one of Veyvoda and Van Cleave's (2020) three R's of service-learning (*rigor*, *reciprocity*, and *reflection*)—and stated that "Projects should not be overly time consuming" since participants should understand their roles and responsibilities (p. 65). There should be course goals and assignment expectations that the student views as their responsibility to the community partner, and any duties beyond this should not be expected of the student from the community partner. Therefore, strong communication plays a great role in effectively setting guidelines and boundaries between students and community partners, especially in an online course where distance may sometimes cause sporadic communication. Some instructors might even consider requesting contracts between the student and partner to clarify roles, responsibilities, and outcomes (Bharath, 2020, p. 65).

Teaching Style. In addition to the need for strong communication between students, peers, and community partners, instructors should set clear expectations for students. Due to service-learning's unique scenarios and circumstances (especially in online classes) that are sometimes out of students' control, it is useful to have flexible and manageable deadlines given so that students and instructors continuously communicate needs to determine a flexible plan for deadlines. Instructors should also encourage class discussion about how students' service-learning experiences align with the class readings and goals; the benefits (such as community building and revision) of peer engagement and discussion are mentioned earlier (Stefaniak, 2020).

Instructors new to online community-engaged pedagogy may likely have to deviate some from the teaching style they are comfortable with while determining how much guidance to offer students throughout the process (Leon et al., 2017, p. 51). In Leon et al.'s (2017) study, one instructor claimed "'good' teaching" happened when they structured the course and then "'[got] *out of my students' way,*'" allowing students to take on the role of active learners (p. 48). In an online class, this concept can apply when instructors facilitate—structure the class and assignments, make the e-service-learning project's goals clear, provide space for peer interaction, and offer support and their presence as students work.

Educators must remember not to treat service-learning goals as an additional layer to the classroom rather than part of the foundation (Leon et al., 2017, p. 51; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020, p. 1544). When service-learning is built into the course, it is more manageable for the instructor and students. However, when service-learning goals and outcomes are added on top of "traditional" learning, they have the potential to overwhelm instructors and students (Leon et al., 2017, pp. 52-53). One service-learning instructor from Leon et al.'s (2017) study preferred engaging with and guiding students' answers (rather than solving students' problems). An example of this occurring in e-service-learning may be students struggling to relate the class material to the project or struggling to understand directions from outside sources like the community partner; instead of the instructor solving the problem for the student, they might give the student resources or aid in critical thinking skills to help the student self-sufficiently solve the issue they are facing. Being facilitators and allowing students a place to fail teaches students rhetorical awareness, problem-solving, adaptability, and responsiveness—critical, transferable self-awareness skills for handling difficult situations (Leon et al., 2017, p. 46). The key to creating this space for failure in an online class

is for instructors to make their presence known and be communicative, guiding, supportive, and provide opportunity for peer discussion. Otherwise, students may lose interest in the project or class and feel abandoned without any assistance, leading to a poor experience.

Develop Resources. E-service-learning is not meant for instructors without resources to be successful—such as strong institutional support or training on community-engaged pedagogy. Without proper instructor-knowledge and resources, the teaching style could lead to issues negatively impacting students, instructors, community partners, and institutions. Educators new to service-learning should consider starting small: doing research, implementing small community-engaged assignments, and/or developing relationships with potential community partners. These manageable tasks help an instructor gain experience in designing and implementing future larger projects (Bharath, 2020, pp. 76-77).

Students also need resources to successfully complete e-service-learning. They need to feel like class content has prepared them, and they need access to communication tools like discussion boards or video conferencing where they can interact with peers and instructors. Instructors should also provide timely feedback and assistance to online students, project management tools (like scaffolded deadlines) to help students manage work, and facilitated class discussions where students can converse about project challenges and course content (Becnel & Moeller, 2017; Stefaniak, 2020). Lastly, instructors should create an understanding that community-engagement should not be used to enhance the ego of students (or faculty) for "doing something good"—community engagement is meant for students and communities to engage and benefit from each other and the experiences (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020, p. 1544).

Student Accountability and Collaboration. There are other ways instructors could implement engagement in e-service-learning. As mentioned previously, scaffolded assignments help pace students and let instructors know students are ready to move forward. Additionally, staggered assignments hold students accountable, allowing instructors and/or community partners to view work that is being done throughout the process in case there is need for interference (Bharath, 2020, p. 73). In a physical classroom where students may present progress or work in groups during class sessions, a high degree of accountability is maintained; however, in an asynchronous online class where students do not meet face-to-face, there should be some level of accountability and presentation of material to ensure students are on-task. Nonetheless, students with higher self-efficacy are more motivated to work toward their goals in online classes, which results in better e-service-learning outcomes (Schneider-Cline, 2018, p. 15).

Stefaniak (2020) mentioned the benefit of using digital tools to engage students in service-learning. Instructors can post videos—a form of digital rhetoric unique to technology and beneficial in online classes—to visually and/or audibly explain challenging parts of projects, model examples of service-learning final products, or connect with students. Digital tools such as discussion boards, synchronous meetings, wikis, Facebook groups, or email may even be used to promote online collaboration. Bharath (2020) said it best: "Educators interested in implementing [e-service-learning] projects for future online courses should not think of distance education as a barrier to success; instead, it is a way to creatively connect students to course materials through the use of technology" (p. 77).

Professional Development. Supporting the notion of instructors' interests in online community-engaged pedagogy is the need for professional development on this

form of teaching. Welch and Plaxton-Moore's (2017) literature and survey results revealed that faculty development programs need to include topics of dissemination of research, how to enhance "community capacity," and how to understand "cultural and systemic dynamics, as well as cultural competency and critical consciousness that impact communities"—all of which relate to community-engaged pedagogy by sharing knowledge and training on working within a community and how this can be an engaging method of learning (p. 155). Although, despite undergoing professional development, instructor-participants in Leon et al.'s (2017) study said the theoretical training they received did not prepare them for the actual experience of teaching service-learning (p. 52). E-service-learning instructors with successful experience in the pedagogy could be valuable course mentors or professional development leaders on the topic. There is room for more scholarship on how to provide meaningful professional development for service-learning instruction—especially e-service-learning, considering the unique challenges (like differing course design, building strong digital communication practices, assessing equality in technology access, etc.).

Community-Engagement in Indiana University East's Online English W321 Grant Writing Assignment

Dr. Margaret Thomas-Evans, associate dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of English at Indiana University East (IU East) implemented a community-engaged grant writing project into IU East's asynchronous, online English W321 Advanced Technical Writing course. Much like the grant writing assignment discussed by Bigelow and Rodgers (2019), IU East's entirely virtual grant writing project allows students to apply their academic training to purposeful projects within their communities (p. 80).

Course Learning Outcomes and Setup

The course learning outcomes for IU East's W321 are to critically analyze technical documents for design and create a range of well-designed documents adhering to rhetorical writing and design principles. These outcomes culminate in the crafting of a grant application for a nonprofit organization to be submitted (with the nonprofit's approval and support) to a funding entity. Undergraduate students begin the class by learning about, examining, and creating technically written design notebooks, business brochures, and operational instructions. These assignments give students practice with design concepts important to technical writing and an understanding of rhetorical and practical layout of written documents before they begin completing grant applications and writing proposal letters. The grant writing project—including all scaffolded assignments (discussion boards, drafts, etc.) within the project—accounts for 245 points out of the 1,000 total points possible in the class.

Participants

Dr. Evans (W321 professor) and Emmy Price (course assistant for W321 from 2019-2021) obtained Institutional Review Board exemption to track the success of student-written grant projects in IU East's asynchronous online English W321 Advanced Technical Writing course. The researchers examined grant writing projects from five sections of English W321 between 2018 and 2021. In total, 101 undergraduate students with various majors were enrolled in these five courses. Each student located and secured a nonprofit for which they would write a grant. However, two students were not able to secure a nonprofit, so those students wrote grants for hypothetical nonprofits given by the professor, allowing the students to still complete the assignment and gain valuable grant writing experience.

Two other students did not submit the final assignment for a grade; one of those students had previously communicated with a

nonprofit, but unfortunately did not complete the assignment, and the other student was not active in the course. When contacting nonprofits to collect data on grant success, four nonprofits informed the course assistant that despite the students submitting materials in class, these four students failed to keep communication with their nonprofits after beginning the project—a communication issue mentioned in the literature review—therefore leaving these four nonprofits without an end-product.

Procedure

As mentioned, community partners were contacted to collect data. Contact information for the students' nonprofit community partners was collected each semester by the professor and course assistant. This information was used each semester for the course assistant to reach out to the nonprofits, serving as a point-of-contact from the university. The contact information was also used by the researchers, Price and Evans, to communicate with the nonprofits after completion of the course when the researchers began tracking data on the success of the student-written grant applications and proposals. Furthermore, when collecting data, the researchers emailed students in an attempt to collect data on the success of the grants. Challenges faced by the researchers included former students who were not responsive to emails or were no longer affiliated with the university and therefore unreachable, and some nonprofit contact persons who were unresponsive to attempts of communication; in some cases, the nonprofit contact person was no longer employed by the nonprofit. Communication problems were noted in the literature review as challenges of e-service-learning. However, select former students still in contact with their chosen nonprofits eagerly emailed the professor of their own will when they became aware their nonprofits' grants were successful. Data collected by the researchers included type of nonprofit organization (e.g., community organization, animal shelter, etc.), total amount awarded, and (when offered by the nonprofit) details on the end-product as a result of the financial award.

Project Overview

Once the W321 grant writing project begins, students are first tasked with locating a nonprofit organization in their area in need of or interested in students' volunteer grant writing assistance. Students who struggle to locate a nonprofit in their area receive assistance from the professor, Dr. Evans, who has nonprofit contacts in Richmond, Indiana, where IU East is located. These nonprofits are often happy to repeatedly work with IU East students over numerous semesters or have multiple students each working on various grants in a single semester. In cases where learners work with a nonprofit local to IU East instead of their own community, the distance has never posed an issue. Ideally though, students should find a nonprofit in their own communities so they are identifying local needs and making professional connections in their own geographical areas.

After securing a nonprofit for the grant writing project, each student submits to the professor their chosen nonprofit's mission statement and other relevant information to show they understand the values of the organization. As previously mentioned, contact information for the students' community partners is submitted to the professor and course assistant. At the beginning of the project, Emmy Price, who served as the W321 course assistant from 2019-2021, reached out to the nonprofits to serve as a point-of-contact from the university for the community partners' questions or concerns. Students then begin work with the community partner, identifying a project within the nonprofit that needs funding. Once the student and community partner choose a project to fund, students research and locate five potential funding entities. Sometimes the nonprofits have funding sources they have previously worked with and can suggest these

sources to students, but sometimes the students must find funding sources based on the nonprofit's needs. Together, the student and community partner decide on a single grant for which the student will write a proposal letter and complete a grant application. Dr. Evans makes it clear that students must not submit an application or grant material to the funder unless the submission is approved by the nonprofit. Additionally, students must work alongside the community partner to gather any financial information or necessary content for the proposal letter and grant application. Veyvoda and Van Cleave (2020) described this process as being "client-centered" as students work with and support their community partners (p. 1546).

Throughout the project, students have opportunities to reflect on their individual project development and share progress with peers, the professor, and the course assistant. As discussed in the literature review, reflection is an effective practice for a meaningful student-experience. Student-reflection in this class takes place in discussion boards and letters to the professor where students share any struggles and successes they are facing. Students are also placed in discussion groups with two to four peers where they submit proposal letters and application material drafts. Based on reading and material assigned in class, students provide suggestions for their peers' work in addition to the feedback received from the professor and course assistant. Scaffolding deadlines allow students to submit their drafts a few days before peer reviews are required. In an online class, this helps ensure all drafts are posted and ready for feedback a few days before peer reviews are due, allowing opportunity for students to receive feedback *and* have ample time to provide feedback to peers. Because each community partner and its needs are unique, students are working on different projects but ultimately have the same goal and are working to meet the same course deadlines as their peers in the class.

As mentioned, students are instructed not to submit their grant application or material to the funder until approved by the community partner. Most of the time, students are asked by their community partner to submit the grant. However, community partners may decide not to pursue the grant; in this scenario, the nonprofit still has the material completed by the student if it decides to apply later or submit the material to another funder. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some funders halted financial support, and some struggling or overwhelmed nonprofits understandably were not able to continue working alongside students as the organizations faced new challenges that needed their full attention. In these few instances, students were able to complete the project hypothetically for the purpose of the class, gaining grant writing experience. However, most nonprofits were grateful for the support during this dire time.

Project Outcomes

Overall, the grant writing project successfully provided community partners with the financial benefit of being awarded grants. Positive outcomes for students included gaining real-world experience in grant writing (one student went on to develop a career in grant writing as a result of the course), networking and collaborating with local businesses in students' areas, learning a new skill and genre of writing, and résumé building—all of which are valuable or transferable skills.

In data collected from W321 courses from 2018-2021, students worked with various types of nonprofits including community organizations, animal shelters, churches, ministries, children/youth groups, health organizations, schools, libraries, music organizations, and sport programs. In total, $149,239 was awarded to nonprofits based on grants written by W321 students. One student raised $98,000 for the International Chamber Orchestra of Puerto Rico (ICOPR) to provide funding to deliver music programs to

individuals who may not otherwise have access to musical arts. This student went on to develop a career in grant writing and continued raising funds to host ICOPR. A total of $37,000 was raised for various children and youth groups. A $7,500 grant was awarded to an animal shelter to purchase an incubator for neonate kittens and to provide over 50 "kitten kits" (containing formula, a scale, nail clippers, and other necessities) for families fostering orphaned and bottle-fed kittens; this helps ensure a better chance of kitten survival and a more positive fostering experience. For community organizations—like environmental centers and neighborhood groups—$5,350 was raised. Additionally, $1,389 was raised for a ministry that provides counseling, education, and support services for men and women experiencing family needs or life issues.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

This community-engagement grant writing project in IU East's English W321 gave students real-world experiences and opportunity to connect with local organizations, prompting one student to choose grant writing as a career. Despite diverse geographical locations, students were able to successfully obtain funding for their chosen nonprofits. Although more research is needed on the unique challenges of e-service-learning (like differing course design, building strong digital communication practices, assessing equality in technology access, etc.), this research provides a window to the benefits, challenges, and strong practices for integrating e-service-learning in an online course. The scaffolded assignments allowed students to stay on task and engage with peers during the process, giving the professor a measurable way to gauge student participation. However, communication between select students and their community partners was a notable problem that came to light after the W321 project completion. Frequent interaction between the instructor(s) and the students is vital to ensure that students are having a positive experience and that everything is going well with community partners. If issues arise, they can then be dealt with in a timely manner and be less likely to impact the overall project experience. Community partners have not been asked to provide any formal feedback on student work; however, this might be something to consider in the future to help keep students on track.

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