

Facilitating Service Learning in the Online Technical Communication Classroom

Journal of Technical Writing and Communication

2016, Vol. 46(2) 236–256

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DOI: 10.1177/0047281616633600

jtw.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Drawing from the author's experience teaching online technical communication courses with an embedded service-learning component, this essay opens the discussion to the potential problems involved in designing online service-learning courses and provides practical approaches to integrating service learning into online coursework. The essay addresses specifically those classrooms where students may be required to develop or find their own service opportunities, whether those opportunities are within their community, on the college or university campus, or in another community. The essay argues by implementing service learning into online classrooms and requiring students to locate their own agencies, students not only build a greater sense of civic engagement because they are working with agencies whose missions they support, but also they develop a greater sense of responsibility for their own education and the coursework they undertake.

Keywords

service learning, online classrooms, instructional technology, community engagement, pedagogy

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Introduction

Service learning is a pedagogical practice that pairs students in specific classes with nonprofit organizations to perform and reflect on cocurricular activities. Ideally, the service performed corresponds to the student's course work for the class in which the service is embedded. When service and coursework act together, service learning provides students with the opportunity to increase their awareness of career choices, develop practical skills, and improve civic engagement. Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of technical communication instructors have taken opportunities to enlist local nonprofits and on-campus organizations in need of grant writing, web and document design, and other technical communication needs to enhance their students' educations through these service opportunities.

The rise of service learning in technical communication classes coincides with the increase in online or distance education. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education found 5.5 million students enrolled in at least one online course during the previous school year, and the Babson Survey Research Group reported approximately 7.1 million students enrolled in online courses (Kolowich, 2014, para. 8, para. 2). Despite the discrepancy between the two surveys, it is clear that a great number of students have or are currently enrolled in online courses and that number continues to increase. Some students may take a mixture of online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses, while others complete entire programs online. This change in the delivery method of courses and service-learning opportunities, from face-to-face to online, poses practical and logistical problems for technical communication instructors wishing to integrate service learning into their online courses.

Drawing from my own experience teaching online technical communication courses with embedded service-learning opportunities, this essay explores potential problems online technical communication faculty may encounter and poses solutions. Because so much of the previous research on service learning comes from instructors or campus service-learning offices who organize service opportunities for students, I specifically address concerns that may arise when students are required to find their own service opportunities. To provide context for these problems and solutions, first, I provide a brief literature review that examines the integration of service learning in technical communication classes, both in face-to-face and online courses, and research on online service learning opportunities. Second, I examine the problems that faculty members in online technical communication classes encounter when embedding service learning in their courses. Finally, I outline how I solved problems and examine the benefits students gain from participating in service learning in online classes. Specifically, I argue the requirement to find their own service opportunities makes students more responsible for their education and increases citizenship practices.

Brief Literature Review

Technical Communication and Service Learning

Because neither online education nor service learning are new, a number of scholars have addressed how technical communication instructors might introduce service learning in both online and face-to-face settings. The advantages and potential setbacks of service learning in face-to-face technical communication classrooms are well documented in studies like Elisa Stone's (2000) "Service-Learning in the Introductory Technical Writing Class: A Perfect Match?," Robert McEachern's (2001) "Problems in Service-Learning and Technical/Professional Writing: Incorporating the Perspective of Nonprofit Management," James Dubinsky's (2002) "Service-Learning as a Path to Virtue: The Ideal Orator in Professional Communication," J. Blake Scott (2004) "Rearticulating Civic Engagement through Cultural Studies and Service-Learning," Therese Judge's (2006) "Service-Learning on Campus," Kathy Mennen's (2006) "Use Service-Learning to Add Real-World Writing Experience to Your Course," Melinda Turnley's (2007) "Integrating Critical Approaches to Technology and Service-Learning Projects," Susan Youngblood and Jo Mackiewicz's (2013) "Lessons in Service Learning: Developing the Service Learning Opportunities in Technical Communication (SLOT-C) Database," and Allen Brizee's (2015) "Using Isocrates to Teach Technical Communication and Civic Engagement."

More recently, Rob Kelly (2012) in "Lessons Learned from an Online Service-Learning Pilot," Krista Soria and Brad Weiner (2013) in "A 'Virtual Fieldtrip': Service Learning in Distance Education Technical Writing Courses" and Tiffany Bourelle (2014) in "Adapting Service-Learning into the Online Technical Communication Classroom: A Framework and Model of the Benefits of Service-learning in Face-to-Face Courses" explored the contributions that service learning makes to online technical communication courses. Soria and Weiner (2013) corroborated evidence found in studies of face-to-face service learning classrooms. They found their students' service learning experiences included enhanced experiences in authentic writing scenarios, and students took more responsibility for their education and assignments. Bourelle (2014) echoed these sentiments, explaining "service-eLearning can encourage student engagement by placing students in an authentic workplace situation" (p. 249) and allowed those students to "learn skills that will transfer to various rhetorical situations" (p. 258).

The skills that Soria and Weiner (2013) and Bourelle (2014) highlighted include those that employers also seek in new hires. A national survey of business and nonprofit leaders conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) found that "nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) say that 'a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and

solve complex problems is more important than undergraduate major” (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013, para. 5). These employers also indicated that they want “critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real world-settings” better attended to in students’ post-secondary educations (AAC&U, 2013, para. 7). Given Soria and Weiner’s (2013) and Bourelle’s (2014) findings, it is not hard to see how online service-learning technical communication classrooms meet these demands from future employers.

In addition to online service-learning technical communication courses providing the same benefits as those that are face-to-face, Kelly (2012) explains online technical communication courses are ideal for service-learning opportunities because the deliverable products like brochures, instructions, and PowerPoint presentations do not require students to physically work at the nonprofit. Soria and Weiner (2013) and Bourelle (2014) also showed service learning can be effective in online or virtual classrooms. The service caused increased student responsibility, attention to and retention of learning outcomes, and civic engagement. These positive findings are encouraging to online technical communication faculty who wish to integrate service learning into their classrooms.

E-Service: Online Learning and Service Learning

Although the literature for online service learning or service learning embedded with online courses continues to grow, most authors discuss organizing opportunities for their students. As a result, few practitioners required students to find their own service opportunities, the main focus of my own investigation. In “Constructing Experiential Learning for Online Courses: The Birth of E-service,” Strait and Sauer (2004) adopted the term “e-service” to define service learning in online courses. Their definition, however, privileged the same concepts as many face-to-face service-learning opportunities, namely collaborative partnerships between students and a larger community. Strait and Sauer’s (2004) partnerships, however, come with one caveat, that the service includes a “virtual” component. The virtual component requires the service to be completed online, although it may include face-to-face work with the partner organization. Realistically, e-service is not limited to online courses. Today, students in face-to-face classes may (and often do) contact and work with their agencies through email and cloud-based document storage. Undoubtedly, most service-learning opportunities involve some sort of “virtual” work between the agency and the student.

Dailey-Hebert, Donelli-Sallee, and DiPadova-Stocks (2008) built on Strait and Sauer’s (2004) definition, explaining that “Service-eLearning is defined as an integrative pedagogy that engages learners through technology in civic inquiry, service, reflection, and action” (p. 1). The authors in their edited

collection defined service-eLearning in a variety of ways, all of which use technology. Some, like Hill and Harris (2008) explained that service-eLearning applies to “service-learning projects conducted online” with online students (p. 75) while a number of other authors discussed face-to-face service but taught online courses. These multiple definitions further splinter the research about e-service learning. For the purposes of this essay, the technology component is found within the course structure itself, and my students have completed service both face-to-face and virtually.

In a similar article that built on Strait and Sauer’s (2004) understanding of e-service, Guthrie and McCracken (2010) made clearer the planning expectations for online service-learning courses in “Making a Difference Online: Facilitating Service-Learning Through Distance Education,” when they noted that for “e-service” to be effective, instructors must ensure that there are “productive and participative learning communities,” that assignments are effectively delivered, and that students encounter “the development of significant areas of secondary learning” (p. 154). Guthrie and McCracken (2010) explained that for an online service-learning class to be successful, students should build digital literacy, instructors should use multiple platforms to present instructional material, and the content management system (they specifically reference Blackboard) should be user friendly. Even though these goals are important for e-service classrooms, they are also important for all online courses and most classrooms in general, and thus, are not distinctly concerned with the immediate questions of integrating service learning into online courses. Additionally, the challenges of the two courses Guthrie and McCracken (2010) described included familiar online education obstacles like balancing the face-to-face and digital-teaching workload, working with students one never sees in person, and ensuring that the course technology works. None of these concerns are directly related to the service-learning portion of the course, even though they all affect a student’s ability to effectively participate in a service-learning experience.

Where Guthrie and McCracken (2010) focused on the e-learning aspects of the course, Julie Phillips’ (2011) “Online Learning and Service-Learning: How They Can Work Together” focused on the service-learning aspects of her course, determining appropriate community partnerships, and ensuring that students were prepared for the service activity. This article provided a number of recommendations such as “select the appropriate course,” “establish clear expectations,” “respond to questions and concerns quickly,” “identify possible challenges upfront,” and “volunteering should align with the course objectives,” among others (Phillips, 2011, p. 4). Just as Guthrie and McCracken’s (2010) information is important to all online learning situations, Phillips’ recommendations are just as appropriate for face-to-face classrooms, as they are for online classrooms. In addition to these overall recommendations, Phillips included some “online tips” such as working to develop relationships

with agencies in other locations and using methods of communication other than email.

Similar articles from sources such as the *Distance Education Report* specifically addressed online service-learning courses but provided frameworks that were either online specific or service-learning specific. Even Soria and Weiner (2013) addressed the benefits of service learning but did not necessarily attend to the problems that online or e-service might encourage nor did the article discuss how those benefits in the online service-learning classroom are different from those in face-to-face classrooms.

In addition to differentiating between online and face-to-face classrooms with service learning, few researchers address specifically, the problems with requiring students to find their own service assignments. Instead, authors often discuss specifically finding opportunities and developing relationships with the nonprofit community near their campus. Both Bourelle (2014) and Phillips (2011) specifically addressed developing a relationship with community agencies and assigning students to those agencies. Soria and Weiner (2013) did not explain whether they made the connections for the students, but they did note that university departments and local nonprofit agencies partnered with their students, suggesting some groundwork may have been done by the researcher-instructors.

The research investigating service learning in both online classes and in technical communication courses continues to grow. Although the research highlights difficulties for instructors and students, they are outweighed by the benefits to students, technical communication programs, and communities. Below, I explore the challenges technical communication instructors who facilitate service learning in online courses may experience. The discussion of these challenges will help instructors prepare for their own service-learning implementation, specifically when they choose to require that students find their own service placements.

Constraints in the Online Service Learning Classroom

This section addresses three specific concerns technical communication instructors encounter in the online service-learning classroom: locating service opportunities, serving in (potentially) isolated areas, and enrolling and engaging non-traditional or part-time students. In a face-to-face course, all of these concerns arise, but in online courses, they become more apparent because of online students' demographics and needs.

Locating Service-Learning Placements

For many service-learning courses, instructors negotiate placements, contact agencies, or organize specific opportunities for their students, and some campuses house offices where faculty members and staff assist the campus

community in designing and implementing service-learning courses. Instructors may assign students to a particular agency, for instance, or have students choose from a list of agencies whose needs or missions match the course objectives and material particularly well and at the same time appeal to students' diverse interests. Bourelle (2014), for example, paired her students with one specific nonprofit agency with whom she had developed a relationship. Both she and her agency contact understood the purpose of this partnership. Often in these situations, whether students choose from a variety of organizations or are specifically placed, instructors or service-learning staff communicates with the agencies to let them know of potential student partnerships, what type of service might be completed, and semester timelines.

This type of collaboration between instructor and agency is useful because ideally service learning both "relates directly to course goals" and "addresses a need in the community" (Bowdon & Scott, 2003, p. 5). When faculty members and service-learning staff create a list of approved agencies, they can ensure that the project will meet these requirements. Margaret Teaford, an online faculty member who uses service learning, recommended that students work only with "an agency that screens its volunteers, has a volunteer orientation and pre-service training, offers written job descriptions for its volunteers, has clear policies on privacy and confidentiality issues, and has a policy on volunteer dismissal" (Lorenzetti, 2007, p. 5). These recommendations protect both the student and the agency.

In online courses, overseeing individual agency placements, missions, and treatment of volunteers is more difficult because faculty members cannot work as closely with agencies, or even at all. In an online service-learning course, both agencies and students may be spread over a large geographical area, and instructors may not have networks within those regions. Additionally, some students may work with their agency in entirely virtual ways while others may have frequent face-to-face contact with their service partners. Even though Bourelle (2014) organized the service for her students, they completed all work and communication in virtual worlds. One student leader in each group corresponded weekly through video with the organizational contact. Both geographic distribution and virtual, assigned correspondence by few members of the class, such as in Bourelle's (2014) group service-learning assignments, may make it difficult for all students to feel invested.

When instructors find agency partners, they can begin to troubleshoot any possible match or assignment problems. However, online instructors do not always have access to nonprofit organizations in every geographic area where students live. Thus, making students responsible for finding their own placement may limit problems that individual instructors have for networking with a number of agencies in a number of geographic regions. Additionally, because of the geographic distribution of online students, offering them the opportunity to find either entirely virtual opportunities or face-to-face placements eases the stress

of student-driven service learning. In my courses, online students are also responsible for communicating with me in their planning stages to ensure the intended service is appropriate for the course's learning goals. This student-generated placement creates an additional constraint: agencies may not be prepared to work with a service-learning student, and they may not return phone calls or provide necessary information for the student to successfully partner with them.

Serving in Isolated Areas

In addition to geographical distribution and potential unfamiliarity with the region where students live, service partnerships may be quite limited for students who live in rural areas. For example, most of my students live in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, but online courses make possible student enrollment from around the world. Students may live in larger cities like Clarksville or Nashville, TN; St. Louis, MO; or Louisville, KY; while others are in rural areas, and still others live on campus and take a mixture of online and face-to-face courses. For students in larger cities and towns or for those who live in the university's community, finding a service agency whose needs meet the goals of a technical communication course may not be difficult. Many agencies need help with report and letter writing, instructional and document design, or grant writing, and these types of projects are ideal for technical communication students.

Students who live in rural communities, however, may find that the choices decrease quickly if they wish to have a service-learning partnership that includes face-to-face contact. Students may only be able to choose from agencies where they do not feel comfortable serving because of religious or ideological beliefs, whose hours of operation do not fit the students' schedules, or in particularly remote locations, have no choices at all. McEachern (2001) explains that considering an organization's often clear and dedicated political or ideological stance is an important factor when students choose a service-learning project; students are less likely to want to work with organizations with which they do not or simply cannot agree.

Bourelle's (2014) research confirmed McEachern's sentiments, when she reported that one of her students found their agency choice, "a grassroots organization that was dedicated to the eradication of stereotypes associated with underrepresented groups, focusing primarily on Muslims and Latinos" (p. 253), to be "inappropriate." The student explained

I learned that I [am] philosophically opposed to charities that focus on 'volunteer demographics' that would include all religions, political factions, and groups based on ideology. People (or animals) that cannot choose to change their associations to an unjust situation would be a more appropriate focus for this type of class. (Bourelle, 2014, p. 257)

Even though Bourelle's (2014) service learning was instructor-organized, the agency was the only option for students. In other courses where instructors collaborate with agencies, faculty can create a wide variety of options from which students may choose; moreover, in instructor-designed service partnerships, students often have agencies who are aware of their participation and can prepare for students. The in-person assistance of faculty members available to students in a face-to-face classroom can decrease student impediments such as finding an agency and ensuring a good fit. For students in remote, rural areas, or for students who have accessibility constraints such as mobility, few options may leave them feeling that the service, like the student above, was "inappropriate" because they are ideologically opposed to the options available.

Meeting Nontraditional and Part-Time Student Needs

In addition to locating potential opportunities and ensuring "fit," online courses encourage an additional constraint: attending to the needs of non-traditional and full-time employed students. Many online courses and programs are designed with accessibility in mind. Students with disabilities, those who do not live near a main or branch campus, who work traditional hours, or who have family responsibilities that prevent attending courses in person, often take online courses because it is the only way they can receive the education. Technical communication courses, especially, appeal to employees who desire to develop workplace-based skills that can lead to promotion or higher wages.

The students who benefit from service-learning partnerships may also be those who have the most difficult time finding opportunities. Students with disabilities, especially mobility impairments, may not be able to travel to agencies. Those with commitments during traditional working hours encounter a similar problem—both the agency's availability and their job responsibilities occur during the same time period, and it is infeasible to perform unpaid work when one must care for family. Moreover, while many nonprofits' hours are not traditional business hours, those agencies that are most in need of the skills of technical writing students may also be those that are the most available during traditional work hours. Traditional-aged students who live on or near campus do not experience these problems as intensely because they are used to studying, attending classes, and working during regular business hours, and their schedules are often more flexible than full-time employees. As online technical communication instructors plan service-learning courses, they must consider how they will meet the needs of students who may neither be able to work with agencies during traditional business hours or even travel to the organization itself.

Online instructors, especially those who choose to make their students responsible for locating service opportunities, may find students encounter difficulties. The location of the instructor, student, or agency, fit between the

agency's and the student's ideologies, and accessibility can all hinder online students. Despite these constraints, online instructors can ensure students have fulfilling service-learning experiences. One solution to these problems is requiring students to find their own placements with concerted guidance from the instructor before and through the semester. As I discuss below, this added responsibility can enhance the student's service-learning experience.

Organizing and Directing Online Service Projects

The constraints listed above are certainly serious and require reflection for any online instructor. They should not, however, dissuade faculty members from integrating service learning into their online courses. This section examines recommendations for instructors who are interested in organizing and directing service projects in online technical communication classrooms. The recommendations can mitigate some of the constraints.

Nearly all of the constraints discussed above can be addressed through the same mechanisms, course planning and clear communication between students, instructors, and agencies. While course planning and communication are vital to all coursework, for online service-learning classes where students organize their own experiences, these two components are vital. Course planning and communication ensure service learning encourages student success in skill development, civic participation, and meeting agency expectations.

Communication With Students

To ensure students have the most successful experiences and organizations are best served, faculty members must plan carefully before the semester begins and work with individual students through the semester on particular problems they may encounter. Working closely with individual students is especially important in courses where students are required to locate their own placements. Instructors should verify the project will help the student meet course objectives and be prepared to intervene on the student's behalf. Requiring students to locate their own project also encourages flexibility, diverse visions of course goals, and more adept trouble-shooting. Above all, communication with students is key, whether that is through email, phone, instant messaging, or video conferencing. I encourage students who are on campus or live in the area to visit in person at least once during the semester.

To ensure students are aware of their course responsibilities, I first alert students to the service-learning project before the semester begins. My university requires faculty members to fill out course information forms for all online courses. Most often, these forms alert students to proctored exams, synchronous class meeting sessions, or required field experiences. This form allows me to tell students before the semester about the service-learning aspect of the course.

Making students aware of the requirements before the semester allows them to prepare accordingly, both logistically and mentally, as they approach their service-learning experience. On the information form, I encourage them to think about different agencies in their area where they might serve, consider what types of volunteer activities they have completed in the past and whether those agencies would welcome a more involved, cocurricular service opportunity, and talk to friends and family who may have contacts within the community. Students are encouraged to contact me with questions before the class starts, especially if they have started to look for agencies and want to know whether potential projects are appropriate. Faculty who are not required to complete similar forms, but who have advance access to a roster, may consider this pre-semester notice useful so that their students too may prepare for service-learning experiences.

After the semester begins, I require students to check in with me on a regular basis about locating an agency, developing a project, and completing the project. In face-to-face courses, this type of communication is usually completed during short discussions before and in class. In the online classroom, these discussions instead happen through individual email conversations, conferences (either virtual or in person), and discussion board posts where students ask for help or offer solutions to problems. Because students are usually not serving at the same agency, they may not see or know about the overlap in assignments and problems without these discussion board posts.

Instructors must work to build community so students see not only the connection to their own goals, but also how everyone's service is contributing to diverse communities. To encourage this community building, I ask students to post to a weekly thread and reflect on how their service connects to the class material. I also include a service learning question thread where students post logistical and genre-based questions. All students are encouraged to respond in this thread, and it is treated like a trouble-shooting forum. I also use email, video lectures, and this forum to create posts after a number of students have asked the same question privately. This trouble-shooting forum builds camaraderie among students, especially those experiencing frustrating situations.

The online classroom can be a lonely environment, but frequent communication between students and faculty members and among students can quell some of this loneliness and encourage students to help one another. Faculty members, with student permission, should facilitate and encourage this posting process. Teaford, for instance, "posts student journal entries on the web for other students to read, leaving out portions or entire entries that the student authors wish to keep private" (Lorenzetti, 2007, p. 7). No matter how useful collaboration within the class is or whether students are experiencing similar problems, it is important both to give students the opportunity to privately share concerns if they wish and provide an open forum for students to use.

Assignments That Facilitate Skill Building and Reflection

In addition to maintaining consistent contact and discussions about their partnerships, the course assignment sequence facilitates the service-learning project. Because I teach technical communication classes, I use service learning as a multi-assignment course capstone experience with a reflective component. This reflection is integral to the service-learning experience. Dubinsky (2002) explains that service learning “combines three axes: *learning* (establishing clearly defined academic goals), *servicing* (applying what one learns for the communal/societal benefit), and *reflecting* (thoughtful engagement about the service learning work’s value). Service learning is *learning-by-doing* for others” (p. 64). Without the reflective component, it is difficult for students to make a connection between the service they do, the course content they learn, and their own civic engagement.

In addition to the documents students produce for their agencies and the reflective work, I require students to write progress reports. This short assignment serves a two-fold purpose: it reminds students about my expectations, and it allows them to practice the progress report genre. As a project leader, this progress report allows me to quickly contact students who are falling behind because they have not been able to find an agency, agency contacts have not returned phone calls or emails, or they simply have not started. Many students, especially those enrolled in technical communication courses, will encounter the progress report sometime during their professional lives. Allowing students to write this report for a real project, assess their time management skills, and address problems, adds authenticity to this writing practice. Additionally, this progress report provides an ideal place for students to reflect on their experiences in the midst of the project, looking for ways in which their service connects to course objectives and how they see themselves understanding and fitting into the community.

Although these frequent project-monitoring assignments like the discussion board posts and progress reports can also occur in face-to-face classrooms, in online environments, these more formalized communications are vital to student success for both learning in the class and serving in the community. If faculty members do not preplan these assignments as interventions, they may not happen until it is too late. Specifically, students may not be able to find a service partner, they may invest a large amount of time in service that does not fit the course’s objectives, or they may not understand the agency’s needs. Faculty members who integrate service learning in online technical communication courses should plan assignments, like those discussed earlier, that facilitate reflection and skill building in relation to the service.

Facilitating E-Service and Student Choice

As important as communication and the assignment sequence are to online service-learning courses, if students cannot complete service, then the

service-learning aspect of the course has not worked. To further enable student success, I allow students to find service projects that can be completed entirely online; in other words, I encourage students to participate in “e-service” (Strait & Sauer, 2004). In the spirit of online education, projects completed online have fewer geographical restrictions and may be more accessible to students with disabilities or schedules that prevent access to agencies during traditional work hours. Students in Kentucky have used email, Skype, and cloud-based services to share information with their agencies in Alabama, Missouri, and other parts of Kentucky.

“E-service” also works particularly well for online technical communication students. Not only are these students already participating in e-learning but also an increasing number of employees currently telecommute, whether full- or part-time. According to an American Community Survey, “telecommuting has risen 79 percent between 2005 and 2012 and now makes up 2.6 percent of the American work force,” and these statistics include only “full-time employees who work from home for someone other than themselves at least half the time.” Many self-employed persons as well as employees without offices (such as insurance representatives or some real estate agents) would cause this number to increase significantly if they were included in the above statistics (Tugend 2014, para. 9, para. 10). Participating in “e-service” prepares students, or “foster[s] professionalization” (Soria & Weiner, 2013), for a job with telecommuting capabilities or requirements.

In addition to increasing students’ professionalization and providing them with new experiences, “e-service” allows students to serve in communities where they have once lived, to use their extended network of friends and family to find opportunities, or even to be particular about the agencies to which they want to contribute so that they do not find themselves, like Bourelle’s (2014) student, at odds with the mission of the nonprofit. If a student would like to address environmental concerns, but there are no appropriate agencies nearby, a student may find one in a different region. One useful resource for e-service is the SLOT-C database managed by Auburn University. Many of the agencies in the database are located in Alabama, but my students who have used the database to find appropriate “e-service” activities have had good success with their partner agencies and have completed diverse projects such as developing a new employee handbook for a foster care system, a white paper on voter fraud, and researching grant-supported funding. The SLOT-C database has been particularly useful for students who live in the more rural areas of the service region or who would like to work with different types of organizations not located near their homes.

One difference between my face-to-face service-learning courses and those that are online is that when I require students to find their own placements, I allow them to work with nonprofit organizations they are already familiar with, whether they have volunteered with the agencies before or currently or have friends and family who are involved. Providing students with the option to

work with familiar agencies ensures that they are interested in the project and often gives them a better experience because they already know the agency's mission and needs. Additionally, if students already understand the agency when they develop the partnership, they can develop a service activity that meets the needs of the agency and course objectives more quickly, allowing them more time to work with the agency and reflect on how their experiences affect them personally and professionally. In face-to-face courses, I encourage students to explore new agencies if they have already worked with some on the approved list, but because online students may have a difficult time making connections, getting agencies to respond, or finding appropriate opportunities, working with familiar agencies often offsets the anxiety that students can have about service learning.

Through partnering with agencies familiar to each student, my classes have revised documents, created and revised websites, and performed needed grant-writing research without the initial downtime of finding an agency and waiting for someone to return messages. These service-learning projects also lead to more useful collaborations for both the agency and the students, for they often move past the popular and familiar advertisement, a document many agencies do not need, but one they assign students because both parties find it "easy" to understand and accomplish. Allowing students to choose agencies with which they had already served or had a connection, worked particularly well in my two grant-writing courses, one of which was taught during a 5-week summer course and one during a full 16-week semester. During the full semester, many of my grant-writing students were teachers in public school systems, and they used this opportunity to find out how they could help their school districts, whether it was through after-school or e-reader programs or increasing technology in classrooms. During the summer, I gave the students the choice to work with a mock agency (because of the shortened time period) or to find an agency. All but one student chose to work with agencies they volunteered with previously and researched grant opportunities for diverse projects including a campus Wounded Warrior project, a community meal center, a branch office for CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children), and a local ESL center.

Finally, I give students choice, as exemplified above in the shortened summer term. Students can choose whether they engage with a service learning a project or not, and they choose to work alone or in pairs. Choice is important. Although I hope that my students choose the service-learning option, I know that time constraints of non-traditional students, geographic location, and life responsibilities can prevent students from completing this activity. More importantly, this choice provides students who try to make contact with agencies, but who get no response, whose contact person disappears during the service opportunity, or whose projects do not materialize in ways that neither they nor I feel will

successfully meet course goals, a way to fulfill the course requirements. Providing students with a choice about whether they participate is not only appropriate service-learning pedagogy, but it also demonstrates an instructor's attention to course objectives and possibilities.

In many ways, these solutions help students take greater responsibility for their education and encourage student choice, both benefits that I discuss below. Because many of the solutions involve pre-semester planning, I have more time during the semester to trouble-shoot, help students understand the different genres they may write that we may not have covered in class, and make contact with the agency representatives if needed. Online technical communication instructors can use the above recommendations to facilitate their own service-learning opportunities in their classrooms.

Benefits to the Online Technical Communication Classroom

A number of benefits stem from integrating service learning into the online technical communication classroom. Empirical studies of service-learning classrooms have found students report greater personal and intellectual engagement in service-learning courses; achieve cognitive gains such as mastering course content and analyzing problems as embedded in complex systems; and register personal development keyed to enhanced self-efficacy, appreciation of diversity, and participation in civic life. (Deans, Roswell, & Wurr, 2010, pp. 2, 3).

These benefits as demonstrated by Soria and Weiner (2013) and Bourelle (2014) hold true in the online classroom. Through service-learning activities, students in online technical communication classrooms develop professional skills, contribute to the classroom and community, and take greater responsibility for their education.

Students Develop Professional Skills

In the most practical sense, service learning allows students to learn how technical communication is produced and used outside of classrooms. Whether students are majoring in technical writing or taking a single course, learning how professionals use technical communication improves career readiness. Service learning teaches students to work with real audiences, an important experience for writing students. Moreover, with permission from the agencies, students create professional portfolios they can use for job and internship applications. In addition to developing greater rhetorical awareness and portfolios, students who participate in service learning create professional networks. If they work with agencies that they are *not* familiar with already, they will meet new people. These professional networks are vital to student career success.

Students Engage in the Classroom and Community

In addition to these practical, professionally oriented benefits, service learning in online classrooms can “connect these isolated students back to their class, to other students and faculty members, and to their own communities” as well as help students “learn about the issues facing their particular communities” (Lorenzetti, 2007, p. 5). Service learning in online courses can both connect students to others in the class and to the communities in which they live. For some students and faculty members, online learning can feel particularly isolating, especially for asynchronous classes where discussions happen through discussion boards, listserv posts, or emails. Discussions of service-learning projects, problems, successes, and reflections may help online students feel as if they are part of a greater learning community rather than participating in an independent study. Students who feel like they are part of a classroom community will be more engaged with discussion boards throughout the semester, experience less attrition, and be more willing to help their classmates.

On a more ideological level exists two more notable advantages of service learning: students hone responsible citizenship practices and take responsibility for their own education. A vital part of my teaching philosophy is the belief that I help develop global citizens who can (and will) serve their local, state, and global communities. All too often technical communication classes are seen as service courses to other departments and programs. Internships and industry partnerships, long part of technical communication programming, encourage students to see the work they perform as services *to* the business rather than collaborations *with* an agency or community. Deans (2010) explains that service-learning students can participate in three different types of writing: writing about the community, writing for the community, and writing with the community. Service learning, especially in technical communication, allows students to participate in the writing with the community and writing for the community spheres, encouraging collaboration with community partners (with the community), and creating documents for agencies that simply do not have the time (for the community). Because all three of these types of community writing involve reflection, students connect the service, community, and course objectives more than an internship or other project-based assignment might. In other words, through reflection, students should realize not only what they learn but also how they learn it in the community through completing their service project.

By connecting service learning with course objectives and specific community organizations, service learning can increase civic engagement. Dubinsky (2002) asserted that service learning helps students become “ideal orators” who are interested in and committed to civic participation, no matter what community they serve. Judge (2006) addressed ways in which students can serve on campus yet outside of the classroom environment. Thus, not all opportunities may move students off campus in their service, but those opportunities may allow them to

interact with different constituencies within the university setting. Our campus, for instance, has recently opened a food bank for students, and I can envision students working with that organization by creating fliers, informational brochures, and instruction manuals for volunteers. This potential cocurricular project allows students to serve within the campus community and connect what they learn in their classes to an organization or activity they may not see as academic.

Sapp and Crabtree (2002) oriented service differently, explaining that when students work with professors, as research assistants in community-based programs faculty members “[modeled] teaching and research as acts of responsible citizenship, demonstrating a comfortable and effective resolution of the teaching-research-service trichotomy that sometimes plagues the professional scholar” (p. 418). Students who engage with nonprofit agencies learn the needs of their community, whether narrowly or broadly defined, and find ways that they can contribute. When students work with faculty members in community programs, they also see the faculty members’ roles in serving the community as well. Service learning and technical communication are no longer the technical communication program serving only the university or even a student serving only a local business, but rather students learn to collaborate with their communities in resourceful, respectful, and educated manners.

In addition to partnering with members of the community, online classes, whose students are spread across service regions, have the opportunity to serve more agencies. In many face-to-face classes, the agencies that benefit from service-learning projects are located near the university. Students in online courses, specifically, and especially those in which students are responsible for locating their own service opportunities, can collaborate with agencies that do not have access to a university campus or a steady stream of volunteers. For agencies in rural areas, these types of collaborations can save staff and volunteers valuable time, making them available to perform other duties. As technical communication students create documents for agencies, they can perform an information, advertising, or organizational service that those currently working and volunteering for the agency may neither have the time nor the skills to complete. For instance, rather than creating promotional materials for an agency, students could design instructional manuals or employee handbooks, as two of my students did when they created an employee handbook for a foster care association. Another student who was a frequent patron of her local library constructed a user handbook to help both the volunteers and visitors use the library and its facilities. Students contribute to the agency’s mission at the same time they hone their own skills, and during this time, the students are “learning about the ways an agency serves the community and about the underlying social injustices it seeks to redress” (Sapp & Crabtree, 2002, p. 425). The better students communicate and the more they learn about the social injustices in their communities, the more prepared they will be to serve the global community. Certainly, these attributes are not confined only to online

courses, but the possible geographic range of students within online courses makes it more likely that underserved agencies may find the skills they need in these students.

Students Take Responsibility for Their Own Education

In addition to civic engagement, students who participate in service learning through online courses also take more responsibility for their own education. This responsibility comes in a number of forms. Early studies of service-learning pedagogies suggested that the real audiences involved in service-learning projects, as opposed to audiences composed only of the teacher or students in the class, resulted in increased student investment in projects (Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999). Students take greater care with their projects when they know that members of the community will not only be seeing them but also *using* them.

In addition to writing for real audiences, in the online classrooms that require student-located service opportunities, seeking out agencies hones students' research skills, makes them aware of different nonprofits in their community or area, and prepares them to make cold calls to prospective agencies. Students must budget their time, leave professional messages, and determine the best way to approach an agency about its needs. These professional skills complement the written documents in the technical communication classroom as well as increase the likelihood of students gaining the benefits of service learning outlined by Soria and Weiner (2013). The more opportunities students have to practice these skills, the more comfortable they will become using them.

Moreover, because the project in my classes is the course capstone, students learned to begin their service early because they did not know what type of projects they would be asked to complete, how much time those assignments would take, or how difficult it would be to find a placement. To facilitate student success, students should be advised early and often to assume responsibility for projects of an appropriate size, scope, and skill level for the course objectives and the weight of the project. For instance, if the service-learning project is a capstone experience for the course, a one-page letter may not be of an appropriate scope for the assignment. A project that redesigns the agency's letterhead, envelopes, and brochures, an experience where the student must use both document design and writing skills, may be a more appropriate experience. Collaborating with students and agencies to determine the appropriate scope and difficulty of a project is a learning experience for the students and shows them that they can achieve much more than they believed at the beginning of the project. Rather than research papers that may be written in the last weeks of the semester, these projects can span the semester during which time students continually build their skills and apply what they learn in class. The reflective aspect of service learning further connects what students learn in the course to their

agency assignment. By requiring frequent reflective practices, students do a better job of connecting their service and classroom experiences.

The benefits of service learning in online technical communication courses outweigh the possible complications, especially in courses where students are required to find their own service opportunities. When online technical communication students participate in service learning, they complete authentic writing for audiences outside of the classroom, they become more engaged with the classroom and greater community, and they take greater responsibility for their own education, as they find and negotiate their service opportunities.

Conclusion

This article examined facilitating service-learning opportunities in online technical communication courses, specifically those classes where instructors require students to find and negotiate their own service opportunities. The article opens with a discussion of the recent research in technical communication-related service learning and online service learning. Both technical communication practitioners and service-learning researchers have found that service learning benefits students' career readiness and citizenship practices. The article then explores the complications surrounding developing service learning in online technical communication classrooms and the possible solutions for those challenges. It concludes with a discussion of the benefits, professional and personal, that classes, communities, and students experience when students take the responsibility to organize their own service-learning opportunities. Although organizing, preparing for, and using service learning in online technical communication classrooms can be overwhelming, the benefits outweigh the possible complications, encouraging student growth and responsibility in and outside of the technical communication classroom.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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