More Than a Deliverable: Building Infrastructural Partnerships in Professional Writing

Trinity Overmyer
Purdue University, trinity@purdue.edu

Lori Bowes
Purdue University, bowesl@purdue.edu

Research with Reflection

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Trinity Overmyer (Department of English)

Lori Bowes (Department of English)

Student Author Bio Sketch

Lori Bowes is a third-year student within the Purdue University Professional Writing program, graduating in May 2020. Working with Trinity Overmyer, her instructor for the course, she produced a podcast series with a group of students, while also delivering a methodology that could be implemented for future use at LTHC.

Trinity Overmyer is a PhD candidate in Rhetoric and Composition and an instructor in the Professional Writing program. Her research includes community-centered research methods and the sensemaking aspects of large scale scientific data.

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Introduction and background with literature review: Professional Writing and Engagement

Successful engagement work hinges on the ability to 1) respond to the specific needs and challenges of an organization or issue, and at the same time, 2) focus on capacity building for the organization in order to catalyze the transformative potential of community-university partnerships (Coles 2017). While thriving one-to-one collaborations can successfully address problems, engagement work can be much more effective when it focuses on the longevity of the partnership and the potential for student work to have ongoing impact after the semester is over. To this end, neither engaged research nor single deliverables on their own provide the kind of transformative outcomes that are ultimately possible.

Professional and Technical Communication has long studied engagement work in the classroom. Approaching writing as a social activity that requires community knowledges, reflection, critique and practical action, helps us understand engagement writing as a social praxis (Blake Scott 2004; Miller 1991). Writing with community organizations helps "students to develop complex, interconnected sets of literacies" (Turnley 2007 pp. 104), which are not only reading and writing, but also research and civic literacies needed for students to use their professional skills for the good of their communities as they move into professional life.

Rather than writing *for* or *about* communities, service-learning projects that require students to write *with* partners—to make knowledge together—creates the opportunity for more robust deliverables and ongoing collaboration. Such service-learning collaborations might take the form of working together in active dialogue or training (Coles 2017), engaging in

institutional and systemic critique (Porter et al), or conducting user-centered, participatory research (Cushman 2002). Service-learning, that is grounded in inquiry, where students conduct primary qualitative (or quantitative) research alongside community partners, has three important student benefits. First, students learn about the community in more situated and complex ways that can transfer to civic literacy and engagement in their post-college lives. As they practice writing for various public audiences, they gain skills necessary outside of the classroom that reinforce the skills they are learning in their coursework. Second, unless the partner organization is very large, partners often do not have the time and resources to perform exploratory and qualitative research with their clients or in the community. Students can play an active role in collecting data that can serve a variety of purposes for the community and continue to be useful for years in the future. Students also learn how to design and conduct user-centered, rather than top-down research, in hopes that service-learning can be a catalyst for change, rather than a colonizing force that positions university affiliates as experts, and partners as passive receivers of help. Finally, continuing to work with the partner, students use this research to create diverse deliverables, which may include educational and training materials for the organization and its clients, outreach communications and creative projects, or more traditional data-driven reports [see *Student Impact* section below]. Primary research projects, when undertaken as a joint knowledge-building effort by all collaborators, can give longevity to students' work and can be an enduring resource for the organization.

In this article, we discuss the research and student work that stemmed from an ongoing partnership between Professional Writing courses within the English Department and LTHC Homeless Services, which provides a network of resources for people experiencing homelessness in Tippecanoe County. The partnership lasted for over four semesters, across a range of required

and elective classes in major, and students conducted primary research as part of their course requirements.

We outline a visual research method where participants take documentary-style photography of their everyday lives, and then use those photos to help them identify challenges, resources, and craft narratives about their lives as they face and overcome living with homelessness. The goal of students' research was to help LTHC Homeless Services better understand the obstacles and challenges faced by residents in their permanent supportive housing units, and to consider narratives that would counter myths and stereotypes about homelessness in the local community. Though the resulting qualitative data is powerful, this article focuses primarily on what we learned about the productive crossover between Professional Writing and engagement work, and the ways in which primary, collaborative community research is only one kind of infrastructure that might be developed in order to transform one-off student deliverables into ongoing, healthy collaborations. The goal of this article is to consider primary research and other formalized structures at work in engagement partnerships, in order to uncover possible ways to bolster the efficacy and longevity of students' service-learning work in the community.

[insert "Voices of Homelessness" photo]

Caption: Documentary-style photography as a community research method can uncover powerful and often invisible methods.

Methodology

The primary student-designed research methods centered around one-on-one interviews, focus groups and documentary-style photography taken by participants. Photovoice is a participatory action research method that asks participants to take pictures of their lived

experience, in order to uncover and communicate the stories of underrepresented communities, like people experiencing homelessness (Sullivan 2016). Photovoice is a relatively newly-established research method that originated in public health (Wang and Burris 1997), and has since been used specifically to work with vulnerable populations and groups whose lives are difficult for outsiders to access (Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001; Castleden and Garvin 2008).

Over the course of four semesters, students designed the study, curated the method, and conducted nine individual interviews and three focus groups, with a total of 18 participants experiencing homelessness in the Tippecanoe County area. The students in these classes also curated the primary research data—including almost 50 photographs, interview transcripts, audio and video files, researcher notes, memos and reports.

A group of participants were recruited by the organization then were given digital cameras to use over the course of the study. Participants were given a list of prompts to help them generate photos and were messaged regularly with reminders via email or Remind, an application that allowed researchers to contact participants and vice versa, in case of questions. Participants were also given a short training session on the goals of the research and how to use the equipment and application. Over the course of three weeks, participants took photos on average every other day. At the end of the period, cameras were collected and photos were printed out. Focus groups were then structured so that participants had their photos in front of them as they were asked to articulate how the images reflected their daily experience. Both students and the instructor conducted these focus groups at the permanent supportive housing units over the course of two semesters.

Following this initial phase of data collection, another set of participants took part in traditional semi-structured individual interviews, conducted by students at the day shelter in the successive two semesters.

[Insert "Typical Day" photo here]

Caption: Narratives and photos of the most seemingly mundane day to day activities can be powerful insights.

Generally, the photo prompts, focus groups and interviews asked participants to reflect on their day to day lives, and discuss the challenges and successes they faced while experiencing homelessness. We asked about their transition into homelessness as well as into housing, and collected narrative data about their experience using local resources and the aspects of their lives that keep them motivated.

Each semester, students began the project by familiarizing themselves with photovoice methods and other qualitative and visual research techniques. LTHC Homeless Services visited class each semester as well, to provide context and education on homelessness, including providing documents and training materials, giving students an opportunity to build on adapted goals of the organization. Other resources provided by LTHC included documents on their clientele, their mission and vision, and volunteer training materials. The initial class of students designed digital databases that were curated and augmented by each successive class with the data they collected. Additionally, all students were given access to project deliverables from previous classes, such as the initial research report, videos created for student awareness, training materials for LTHC staff on how to produce and edit various kinds of videos, and of course, the primary data. Throughout all four semesters, LTHC Homeless Services encouraged us to frame

this as exploratory research, where students could ground their goals and deliverables in their perspectives on the data.

Results: Project Deliverables

These resources were the building blocks for a large number of the projects completed in this course. Because this work spanned several semesters and almost 100 students altogether, access to prior service-learning work was crucial, so that the collaboration was not continuously reinventing the wheel. Previous semesters' work framed and structured the next semester's projects and goals. Students entered into an ongoing collaboration, just as they might in the professional realm, and were able to learn the discourse and goals of the project through past students' deliverables. In this way, the partnership is distributed *temporally* over many semesters; *socially* across a network of students, LTHC staff and clients, and the instructor; and *discursively,* through the texts, images and databases that structured our research across semesters.

[Insert "Dennis Window" photo here]

Caption: *Photo credit: Sterling Sardina, student researcher.*

The various multimedia and research projects completed gave students the opportunity to hone their professional writing and media design skills. Students worked with software outside their knowledge and expertise, developed much-needed interview skills with the clients at LTHC, and actively addressed community needs in their work. In addition, students took responsibility for their own project and team management, in the similar ways they might do in a capstone project or in their careers.

Based on students' research with our partner and their clients and the needs of the organization, a range of deliverables were created during the partnership, including:

- Reports covering methods, with thematic and narrative data analysis

- Grant applications for Purdue service-learning grants

- Revised volunteer training and outreach materials

- Marketing materials for development events

- Training and documentation on conducting staff interviews and doing cost-effective, fast video editing

- Videos with student interviews aimed at recruiting volunteers from campus

- An animated outreach video breaking myths of homelessness

- Portraiture of participants

- A printed book showcasing the stories and photos and LTHC's impact on the community

- A digital book which used the data to create artistic renderings of quotes, images and narratives

- A short podcast series and an episodic and logistical framework designed so that production could potentially continue

Through these respective projects, students were able to learn new technologies they may not have come into contact with prior to taking the course, including sound and video editing software and production, animation and drawing software, and publishing platforms. More importantly, students gained experience collaborating with team members and non-campus professionals, while working on professional deadlines with real world impact. They also studied and practiced how narratives are built to reach particular audiences and for specific purposes, and cultivated the kinds of reflective primary research practices they would be tasked with in their professional lives.

Community Impact

In the Fall of 2018, the research, technical projects and creative work that emerged from this partnership between Professional Writing and LTHC Homeless Services culminated in a gallery event, featuring the photography, writing and narratives of both LTHC clients and the Purdue students who worked with them. Approximately 50 people attended, including several local media outlets, representatives Purdue's Office of Engagement, and staff from the YWCA, Tippecanoe Arts Federation, and Valley Oaks, among other organizations. While this event was not the initial goal of the research project or the partnership, the sustaining collaboration and the gallery event made a lasting impression in the community with other nonprofit organizations.

[Insert "WBAA Pete Diner" photo]

Caption: The community gathers in the heart of downtown to attend the gallery event.

The goal of this event was threefold: First, the aim was to dispel myths about the causes and experience of homelessness in the county. With this aim, participants' photos were professionally mounted and hung, and the photographers were invited to come discuss their work with attendees, similar to a traditional art gallery opening. Additionally, the event included poetry and narratives written by clients, alongside books, videos and other multimedia work produced by students that framed the experience of homelessness as a human condition, rather than spreading the cliché that homelessness is the outcome of immorality or laziness (Hocking and Lawrence 2000). Since the event, proceeding semesters of Multimedia Writing have augmented the initial research with more narratives of people experiencing homelessness, in order to provide

richer data to LTHC about the obstacles and attitudes that motivate clients or cause obstacles to their success in LTHC programs.

[Insert "WBAA 2" photo]

Caption: Participant photos offer another look at the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

Secondly, the gallery worked to introduce community organizations and other Purdue instructors to new possibilities for engagement work—particularly for those people who had not had experience with community-university partnerships, or for those who have had less than successful collaborations in the past. Since the event, the local arts federation began working with LTHC Homeless Services to expand the show in the future and move it to their gallery. Additionally, the YWCA Domestic Violence Shelter has started working with Purdue researchers to produce a similar project with their clients, emphasizing the power of self-representation and narrative to empower survivors. This event is scheduled for Fall 2019.

Finally, the event served to showcase students' investment in community work and how this experience impacted their understanding of both their own course material. Student work demonstrated the ways in which professional writing can be an active force in community building and civic engagement. Students from past and current semesters attended, showcasing their work with participants and community members, while also articulating their now nuanced understanding of those experiencing homeless, and the structural forces at work for and against this community. Because students' work moved from writing for a real exigence, then into publicly discussing their work and reframing it for a range of audiences, the students were able to reflect critically on their work for different contexts, and engage as active and productive

members of the community while gaining skills necessary to succeed beyond their academic experience.

Beyond the immediate impact of a single project, creating infrastructure for service-learning work can have far-reaching implications on the relationship between community organizations and the University. One of the biggest obstacles with service-learning is the tendency for projects to focus solely on deliverables that benefit student learning, but which are not useful for organizations and are left for the community organization to implement on their own without additional support (Leon and Sura 2013). These kinds of one-off projects might sometimes be necessary, but when the semester ends, often the partnership ends, too. This means collaborations have to be rebuilt each year or semester, on university timelines. Such situations can sour community organizations' interest in working with students and cause each partnership to continually reinvent the wheel, thus missing opportunities to grow an idea into an active force for change and service improvement.

Our experience in this ongoing community project amassed a wide range of data for LTHC and their clients. However, the larger implications of this work led us to focus on the ways in which the infrastructure of engagement and service-learning on campuses should be reconsidered so that projects such as these can have more support and more lasting impact in the community.

Thriving community organizations understand the importance of social networks and informal infrastructures to sustain and grow their work. However, students and academics are often used to having solidified institutional structures to support their work, and they may take for granted that community organizations have to continuously build their support networks and resources in the midst of continuously changing communities and clientele. LTHC Homeless

Services' Development Director, Jennifer Shook, spoke about the power of personal and social

relationships for community organizations: "For LTHC, being able to have some core

relationships at Purdue has been great. It gives a starting point for making connections and

asking questions. The service-learning relationships have helped us establish a better presence on

campus for outreach to faculty and students" (personal communication March 28, 2019).

In order for a service-learning class to be successful, infrastructure is necessary on both

the academic and community sides (Simmons and Grabill 2007), otherwise there is a higher risk

of one-off projects and dwindling work. More importantly, partnerships must have resources they

can draw on separately to bring into the collaboration, plus they must form or grow the

partnership's infrastructure as a new, independent collaboration. Often the most-used resource is

the social relationships built among individuals. According Shook, faculty members'

participation and mediation of ongoing projects is a vital structure to healthy partnerships:

> Historically, LTHC's relationship with Purdue classes was a "one and down" sort of arrangement, where students make a product for us that we may or may not be able to use. Those helped students complete the class but were not very helpful to us. Working with professors who use a service-learning approach has been much more beneficial in many ways. First, it does result in a product that our agency can use which is great when you have very limited budgets for these kinds of things. But these relational projects are more valuable to our guests and students than just the "output." For our guests, they have the opportunity to interact in normal ways which is always a gift to them. They are meeting people who want to better understand their situation and are invested in hearing their story. Finally, it also changes the students. Often, they have no history of interacting with our population, so it is at the very least eye-opening. At the most, and what we see very commonly, is that it changes their perspective about the world, how they perceive their own role in the world, and prompts them to make decisions that change how they interact with others. (Personal communication March 28, 2019).

Here, Shook's insight about the benefits of "normal" interaction among students, staff

and community members is another facet of social infrastructures that we lean on during

community projects. However, social resources are not often supported as legitimate work in the

eyes of the university. While community organizations often support relationship-building for development and other staff, a large part of this kind of work remains invisible to institutions such as the university. Infrastructure is not "stable, fixed— visible even—but rather emerges—becomes visible and meaningful—through use" (Grabill 2010 pp. 15). Such is true for the social infrastructures that service-learning and community work hinge on. However, if social infrastructures are only visible to the people that use them or when they break, then the larger institutions that support service-learning do not see them, and therefore cannot support them, even though they are key components to successful community collaborations.

Traditionally, service-learning in the Professional Writing program has perpetuated in similar ways, through informal social connections and passion projects of individuals. However, there are some resources in place to facilitate this work. For instance, many graduate students who teach in the Professional Writing program integrate service-learning into their undergraduate curriculum. They are able to do this because they take a graduate class on civic engagement, which helps them develop community partnerships and consider the larger ethical implications of engaged work. Based on work with the Professional Writing faculty member who teaches this class, several instructors have served as University Engagement Fellows, working closely with the administration to develop and support service-learning work, University-wide. While some engagement infrastructure does exist in the program, it is ultimately dependent on one faculty member's lead, and therefore it essentially acts as a somewhat informal, albeit stable, resource network in the Professional Writing program.

Building infrastructure is unsexy work. It does not always easily culminate in flashy student research posters or in celebrated projects that can be contained in a semester's coursework. It requires commitment on all fronts, from instructors, students and community

partners, for the long term. With this in mind, we have primarily focused our engagement work on community research, and teaching and training materials, rather than on one-off deliverables, in hopes that it will have longer reach into the institutional goals of LTHC Homeless Services. Research operates as a kind of infrastructure, because it organizes and communicates knowledge, and acts as a support for various kinds of community goals. When Professional Writing students conduct research with the community, and create, gather and teach resources to others, they move from being focused on production, to learning about the pivotal role that technical communicators play as organizers and mediators in an organization's knowledge and human infrastructure.

Engagement requires being invested in the complex issues of the partner and thinking through the exigencies and constraints of projects, not just proposing solutions from outside the problem. Community service projects are a "place for collaborative inquiry" (Cushman 2002 pp. 45) that not only benefits a wide range of stakeholders, but also undergirds a range of knowledge making practices among the community organization, the students, and successive academic research. Research *with* and *for* the community creates an exigence where students have to get personally and intellectually invested in work outside the classroom. When this work is also literally outside the classroom, moving into community spaces, students begin to experience first-hand the complexity of building sustainable work.

Student Impact: Reflections on Professional Writing as a Student Practitioner

One of the primary projects we focus on in this article is a podcast series that exemplifies the skills we developed through the partnership. We used the research and others' technical projects as a foundation for producing a short podcast series, which addressed issues related to

homelessness. Our project culminated in a number of buildable professional writing skill sets, including storyboarding, outlining and scripting each episode; conducting supplementary research on LTHC and homelessness; recording the scripted audio; and learning and utilizing audio editing software.

[Insert "Insanity LTHC Narrative" photo here]

Caption: Reflections of homelessness.

Our goal was to engage with the participants' stories and experiences in a way that honored their struggle. We worked hard not to whittle the participants down to stereotypes or to put them on pedestals. We started from the assumption that most people in the community are good but may not understand the complexities and trials that have to build up in order for a person to enter homelessness. The content of the podcast was designed so that it might counter some popular myths of people experiencing homelessness and humanize their experience for others. As a medium, podcasts do not include visual elements, and so the communication of a message can be streamlined. As opposed to videos, which present a screen as separate from the audience, podcast audio can have the opposite effect, where the audience can project themselves more easily into a story as it plays out literally inside their head.

The series included an introductory episode explaining the purpose and themes of the podcast, and two additional episodes that focused on the clients' personal stories as they dealt with homelessness. We also built a scaffolding so that LTHC Homeless Services could continue the initial work. Many service-learning projects live and die in one semester, meaning they are given to the partner and forgotten. Even in our case, there have been one-off projects to some extent, where LTHC did not have access to adapt or add content, or were left to implement projects on their own. However, we wanted to change the model. In addition to the audio files,

we delivered a methodological report that demonstrated keys for writing transcripts, using sound editing software, and the overall methods we used throughout the project. We used this methodological and technical report to also reflect on our own work throughout the class, and integrate our understanding of professional writing theory and skillsets. With the inclusion of this methodology report, LTHC had the tools to continue the podcast series on their own or just implement the series we created.

Instructor Pedagogical Reflections

The various tasks as a part of the larger podcast project helped to foster a more driven approach to civic engagement while encouraging students to practice reflective writing and focus on building a foundation for future projects. Students within the Professional Writing program will enter the workforce with an expectation from employers to embody a number of hard and soft skills. While the hard skills—the ability to elicit information from subject matter experts, knowledge of project management, and strong technical communication—act as the backbone for much of the Professional Writing curriculum, the attending soft skills will foster a more well-rounded student who will be able to access the working world more successfully. This project is a good example of how these soft skills, while not entirely embedded in the Professional Writing curriculum, are necessary to succeed as a professional writer, while also becoming productive and engaged leaders in their communities. Projects similar to ours in scope, and with an eye toward longevity would help solidify partnerships in our community, but designing service-learning with key rhetorical aims, such as user and audience awareness, lasting action-oriented work, capacity building, and ground-up research would greatly strengthen the potential of students' engagement work and the University to have lasting impact.

At least four students during the course of the collaboration have continued to volunteer or intern with LTHC, while other students have taken up partnerships and writing internships with other local community organizations. More importantly, by drawing on professional skills, engagement work models the ways in which students might contribute to their own communities as professionals in the future. Engagement work can foster a sense of confidence and responsibility in the next generation of educated professionals. Students who graduate from this program will be able to continue contributing with the knowledge and skills they gain from courses that champion community research. This initiative will encourage stronger and longer-lasting partnerships with community organizations within and outside of the Lafayette area. These professional writing students can then forge stronger professional relationships and contribute to a growing need for such work in community organizational efforts.

The classes emphasized a focus on rhetorically-based practices and user-focused design. While these are important building blocks for students within the major, exercising skills through comprehensive service-learning projects expands the knowledge and experience students can gain through a single semester course. Narrowing the focus on specific software production and design with an emphasis on multimedia through writing allows the students to gain a myriad of skills that often fall outside of the traditional idea of academic writing. These skills are necessary for students to become successful and productive citizens and professionals as they reach graduation and beyond. At the same time, these projects impact the community in substantive ways.

Conclusion

Future development of ongoing engagement projects that implement the use of primary research could help build rapport among students in Professional Writing program and LTHC, or among the University and a myriad of community organizations. Conducting primary research in the community gives students the opportunity to work alongside community members from a variety of backgrounds and expertise, while also augmenting traditional coursework and skill development. Additionally, making curricular space for students to attune to the often invisible social and administrative infrastructures of community partners also positions students to develop a critical reflective stance of the organization and students' roles in their engagement work (Grabill 2010). Critical reflection on the collaboration and its agents that occurs in dialogue *with* the partner organization can be a generative exercise that opens paths toward larger institutional change in the community and its service providers.

While technical deliverables and one-off projects can be useful for community members, long-term collaborations are more beneficial for all stakeholders, even (and especially, perhaps) when they are built from personal, social relationships. But the biggest question is how do we maintain long-term projects and create infrastructures to support them, when so much of engagement work is built around personal relationships, and students are, in essence, transient in college towns?

Future work might consider collaborations between individuals or groups of students and a community partner that begin early in their undergraduate degree and continue on in some capacity throughout students' work in the Professional Writing program. This model would serve to sustain longer-lasting relationships and generate more productive engagement for students, who would then hold a larger stake in community and the organization's mission and vision. This

type of service-learning-driven curriculum might culminate in a final thesis project, where students would have the opportunity to leave the program with a larger portfolio of work and experience as well as the opportunity to work more independently on projects of their chosen interest. A program like this might also cultivate deeper mentorship with faculty, and peer to peer mentoring among upperclassman and students new to the partnerships.

Though there are documented problems with institutionalizing engagement work, there are also issues with work that hinges on a single relationship. There is possibility in a model which fosters long-term engagement, while also being bolstered by University infrastructures and resources that support students' academic development and at the same time, wield our considerable collective skills and knowledge as a resource for the larger local community.

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