Increasing student access to client information in the service learning technical communication classroom:
Comparing three client strategies

Sarah Gunning, PhD
Technical Communication & Rhetoric
Towson University Baltimore, MD US
FRAMEWORK

• Pedagogical perspective, before students become professionals
• Assuming silos exist VS preventing them
• Strategies to help Tech Comm students work with SMEs

Background:
• Service learning projects: mixed results
• 1 group = going off on own way?
Client revisions, dissatisfaction

Kastman Breuch:
Areas where students struggle with critical listening:
1. Overruled requests
2. Unheard requests
3. Need for affirmation

What are ways to address critical listening skills in service learning?
SERVICE LEARNING CONTEXT

Service learning:
a form of experiential education where students engage in activities addressing community needs via structured opportunities. Reflection and reciprocity are key. - Jacoby 1996

• Providing experience working with clients
• Writing for workplace vs teacher
• Socializing into the profession, expectations

RELATION TO SILOS:
Students’ pre-existing skills implied:
• Ability to access information needed for projects
• Ability to work with information effectively, correctly
• Learning the professional skills involved in information retrieval
AREAS OF ATTENTION

RE: WORKING WITH SMEs

Skills lacking coverage in pedagogy:

i. Research methods
   i. Collecting data, evidence to make claims
   ii. Interviewing, asking the right questions
   iii. Soft/interpersonal communication skills

ii. Critical listening
   i. Hearing clearly, correctly, in entirety

iii. Debriefing
   i. Critical reflection
   ii. Assessing strategies others used, what to borrow

iv. Focusing on process over product
   i. Intangible aspects of writing
   ii. Concerns of grades vs soft skills learned

See references
STRATEGIES

1. Multiple clients, multiple projects
2. Multiple clients, one project
3. One client, one project

Each incorporated team writing/debriefing strategies from Wolfe

- Team charter, communication style assessment & discussion, agenda, Gantt chart, task sheets, minutes, debriefing

Course assignments:

- Grant proposals, web content, social media assessments, template creation, document revision
POPULATION

• Graduate students in Professional Writing
  – New to profession/career change
  – Still rare to have undergraduate degree in Tech Comm
  – Varying levels of familiarity with the topics
  – Convenience sample

• Classes
  – 3 service learning classes, 15 weeks long
  – Introductory Tech Comm, grant writing courses
  – 11-26 students per class
1. Multiple clients, multiple projects

4 teams/projects, 3 different clients
- Debriefing occurred in teams but not whole class
- Teams managed own timeline/call schedule with client

Results
- **Team 1, 2**: Two grant proposals funded (both for client 1)
- **Team 3**: did not finish original plan; had to adjust deliverables lacked research method skills, overruled requests
- **Team 4**: Unable to retrieve enough information from client 3, somewhat paralyzed process lacked research method skills

Rate of satisfaction:
- **Client 1**: both client & students very satisfied
- **Client 2**: both client & students mildly satisfied
- **Client 3**: Very low (client disappeared), students unsatisfied
2. One client, multiple projects

5 teams/projects, 1 client
- Introduced call recording via ZOOM
- Debriefing: via individual teams for detail, in class for general concepts
- Class had a single timeline/call schedule with client

Results
- **Team 1**: deliverable accepted for corporate use/distribution
- **Team 2**: client satisfied with deliverable, may use
- **Team 3, 4**: client requested several updates, revisions *unheard requests*
- **Team 5**: missed target; did not align with client’s needs *unheard requests, overruled requests, need for affirmation*

Rate of satisfaction:
- Client satisfaction corresponded to deliverables
- Teams all reported moderate satisfaction with SME contacts; less so within Teams 4 & 5.
3. One client, one project

3 teams, 1 client/project (competing for best version)
- Call recording via ZOOM
- Debriefing: as a class, reviewed 2 calls (strong/weak interactions) after meetings to debrief and assess interpersonal strategies
  - Analyzed questions asked, echo strategies, clarity of concepts
  - 50% of time spent on soft skills, 50% on product production

Results
- **Team 1, 2**: client highly satisfied with deliverable, tied between teams
- **Team 3**: client requested very minor revisions *unheard requests*

Rate of satisfaction:
- Client satisfaction corresponded to deliverables
- Teams all reported high satisfaction with SME contacts
#3: MOST PROGRESS IN SILO ACCESS

Areas of improvement in deliverables & student/client relationship

i. Research methods
   i. Collecting data, evidence to make claims
   ii. Interviewing, asking the right questions
   iii. Soft/interpersonal communication skills ← prioritize

ii. Critical listening
   i. Hearing clearly, correctly, in entirety
   Are there instances of unheard/overruled requests, need for affirmation? How to prevent

iii. Debriefing
   i. Critical reflection
   ii. Assessing strategies others used, what to borrow

iv. Focusing on process over product
   i. Intangible aspects of writing ← add a grade?
   ii. Concerns of grades vs soft skills learned
IMPLICATIONS FOR SILO ACCESS

• Fewer variables, the better in pedagogy
• Promote evaluation: 50% process, 50% product
  – Students still concerned about “grade” - pseudotransactionality
• Increase explicitness re: importance of debriefing, critical listening, info seeking process
  – Have students read literature on gaps
  – Identify strategies for echoing/verifying information
  – Discuss repercussions for misinterpretation
    • See Kastman Bruech in particular
  – Connect dots between soft skills and writing skills
• Focus on technical communication vs technical writing


Gordon


