

A MEANINGFUL WRITING EXPERIENCE: STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON CLIENT- BASED BUSINESS PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

Business communication courses often give examples for various written genres in textbooks or other writing prompts but may not offer students the opportunity to practice writing for an audience outside of the classroom. While many studies encourage the use of client projects, few studies have explored how these types of projects influence the students in their learning and reflection processes. This project will analyze the reflections from two business communication classes who completed a research project for a real client in the community. Student feedback from written reflections shows that students felt it was an impactful learning experience to be a part of the process.

Keywords: community engagement, business communication, client projects

INTRODUCTION

Business communication courses are created to give students practice writing for future business situations. Business communication courses often give examples for various written genres in textbooks or other writing prompts but may not offer students the opportunity to practice writing for an audience outside of the classroom. Some courses address this issue by teaching case studies, so students can practice responding to specific business situation. However, these case studies merely mimic the workplace situation and do not give students the opportunity to receive client feedback. One method for addressing this problem is by assigning project-based community engagement assignments that involve an authentic client in the local community. The end product

benefits both the students in their learning process and the community partner with their business/organization.

While many studies encourage the use of client projects, few studies have explored how these types of projects influence the students in their learning and reflection processes. This project will analyze the reflections from two business communication classes who completed a research project for a real client in the community. Open-ended student reflections were completed after finishing the community engagement experience. Findings and implications for business/professional communication instructors will be discussed.

LITERATURE

Professional communication researchers have analyzed the advantages of using these assignments, such as working on community-related issues, practice with real client writing situations and client feedback, and transfer of learning from the classroom to students' future workplaces (Blakeslee, 2001; Bourelle, 2012; Cyphert, 2006; Tuomi-Grohn, 2003; Wickliff, 1997). Studies also show these types of projects can increase problem-solving skills and student motivation (Lopez and Lee, 2005). Rohm et al. (2021) found that client-based projects better prepare students for their future careers.

Although many different terms are used, here the term that is used is Academic and Community Engagement (ACE), which is the term that this university (the mid-sized, southern land grant university this research was based at) uses. ACE experiences are those which a class will complete for a real client in the community. Students get experience working with a real client and contributing to their community, and the class goals meet a real client need. Our university believes the overall goal of community engagement courses is not only to forge strong community-university partnerships to improve life but also to affect a transformation of students' personal development and sense of social responsibility. Note that this pedagogy is referred to in a number of ways in the literature, but here the author uses the language that this university uses and refer to academic community engagement courses and academic community engagement pedagogy. This description of ACE served as the background for all client-based projects that were assigned in this business communication class.

The many benefits of community engaged pedagogy is well established in the research (Chittum, Enke, & Finley, 2022; Buch & Harden, 2011; McDaniel & Van Jura, 2020; Painter & Howell, 2020). Not only do community engaged courses benefit student learning, but they also contribute to the public good (Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). Similarly, Chickering (2008) explains how community engagement encourages students to develop and become involved citizens in democracy.

In a study on faculty motivation by Darby & Willingham (2022), they found that faculty valued working on community engagement projects with students because it can create connections, and their students found value and learning opportunities from those projects. Similarly, Denham, McCauley, Miller, and Schieber (2024) found that the main motivations for faculty to continue teaching community engaged courses were the many benefits to student learning and the positive impact on the community partners, and Cooper (2014) found that community-engaged faculty simply enjoyed the experience of working with their colleagues in similar projects.

METHODS

The study received exempt IRB approval (IRB #34158). The site of this study was in two undergraduate business communication classrooms at a regional mid-size southern university. Students were asked to complete a research recommendation report and create a visual deliverable for the local women's shelter. (Please see assignment sheet in Appendix A). The assignment was focused on helping the women's shelter with community outreach. Each student or student group would focus on a different audience member for the women's center to reach out to, giving them important information about the services that the shelter offers for the community. Students were also asked to create one visual deliverable for the client to use as an example.

After the project was completed, students were asked to complete the following reflection questions using an anonymous survey tool.

Reflection Questions

1. Overall, can you describe your experience working on this project?
2. Thinking about the link between theory and practice - how did this project help you use and practice business communication skills?
3. How did it affect your work ethic and product to actually work with a real client?
4. Did you feel that you improved upon certain topics that we covered in this class by completing this project? If so, how?
5. What are some specific areas that you feel you still need to improve upon?
6. Many articles note the importance of being an engaged citizen as a business professional. How did this project influence your idea of the impact of community engagement? Why should we be engaged? Why is it or is it not important?
7. What is one way that this project has made you more marketable to an employer?

The anonymous survey data from the students who chose to be involved in the project was all compiled in a document. The author then analyzed the student reflection data using qualitative methods, looking for similarities in student responses. The author used Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) content analysis to sift through the data. The student responses, based upon the themes that emerged, were then put into an Excel spreadsheet for better analysis. Grounded Theory encourages an iterative process (constant comparative process) to sort through data to see what comes out of the reflections/students' words. The themes that emerged were analyzed for trends and quotes from the student reflections are added to the analysis for illustration.

The research questions for this project are:

RQ 1: How did students describe their experience working with a real client online?

RQ 2: Were there skills that students felt they improved upon?

RQ 3: How do students feel that working for a real client made them more marketable?

The trends were analyzed according to these research questions in the following section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1: How did students describe their experience working with a real client online?

The author first wanted to just see how students felt the project went working for a real client in an online course. The questions were open ended to give students an opportunity to discuss their experience fully. The responses were organized into the following themes that emerged from their reflections on their experience:

- More meaningful/impactful
- Wanted to work harder
- Took it more seriously

- More focused



Interestingly, most of the student reflections either focused on how meaningful or impactful the project was for them, or how it encouraged them to work harder because they were working for a real client. Four students noted that the project did not create a change or did not really affect them in a specific way, and four students did not actually answer the question in a way that made sense (e.g. one student noted that it was nice to “put a face to a company”).

Many students noted how much the project impacted their motivation levels. One student noted that the impact of working with a real client also impacted their level of motivation:

“I was so much more motivated knowing the report could actually help someone and not just be graded then never seen or used again. It took on a whole new purpose to do a report for a client with us an amazing purpose.”

Similarly, one student noted how much harder they ended up working on this project:

“Working with a real client definitely positively affected my work ethic and product. I did not procrastinate nearly as much as I do on normal assignments. I think this is because I am not the only one counting on the work to be done well.”

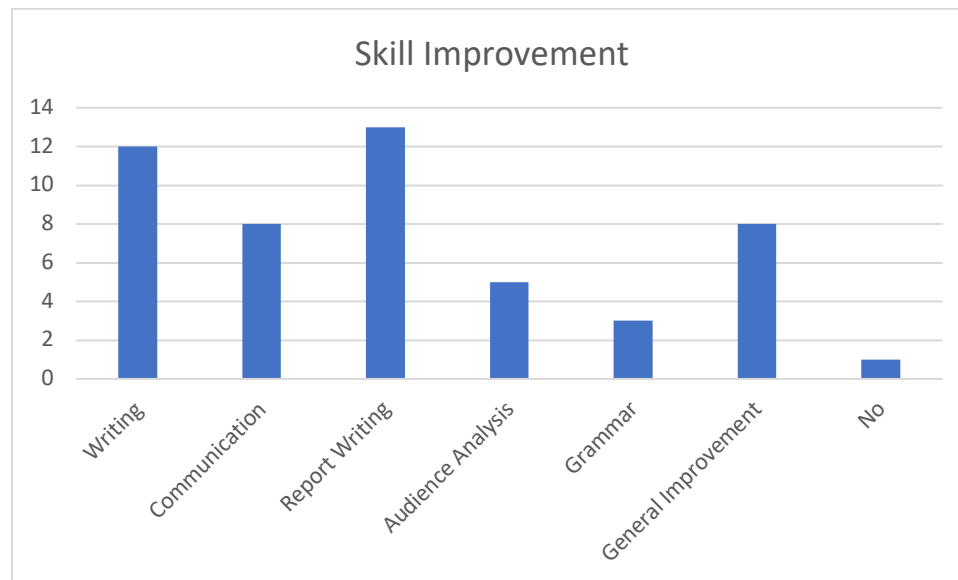
Another student noted about their own work ethic, “This assignment made me want to work twice as hard as I would for any other report because I knew that we were essentially doing this for a good cause.”

However, one student who felt that the project didn’t make much of a difference noted about how the project impacted their work, “not to (sic) much, I work with real clients daily.” The author is pleased that this type of response was not very common.

RQ 2: Were there skills that students felt they improved upon? What were they?

Students commented that some of the skills that they felt they improved upon fell into the following categories:

- Writing skills improvement
- Communication skills improvement
- Planning out a report
- Thinking about audience and writing to them
- Grammar improvement



The largest category that students mentioned for their own skill improvement had to do with planning and writing reports. One student commented:

“Yes, I learned how to use secondary research better with this project and also by having a real interview and having that as a resource was something I had never done before.”

The next largest category, not surprisingly, was the writing category. One student mentioned, “I feel that I improved on my writing technique overall in this class and this project gave me more practice to home in on that skill.”

Eight students felt that their overall communication skills were improved by working on this project. One student stated,

“Yes, I feel like I did improve when it came to listening to what is needed in the assignment. I also feel as if I improved my teamworking skill after working with other people on this assignment.”

Five students addressed their growth in learning audience analysis: “I do feel I improved in topics such as determining who the audience is, how to address them, and how to attract the audience and client with our work.”

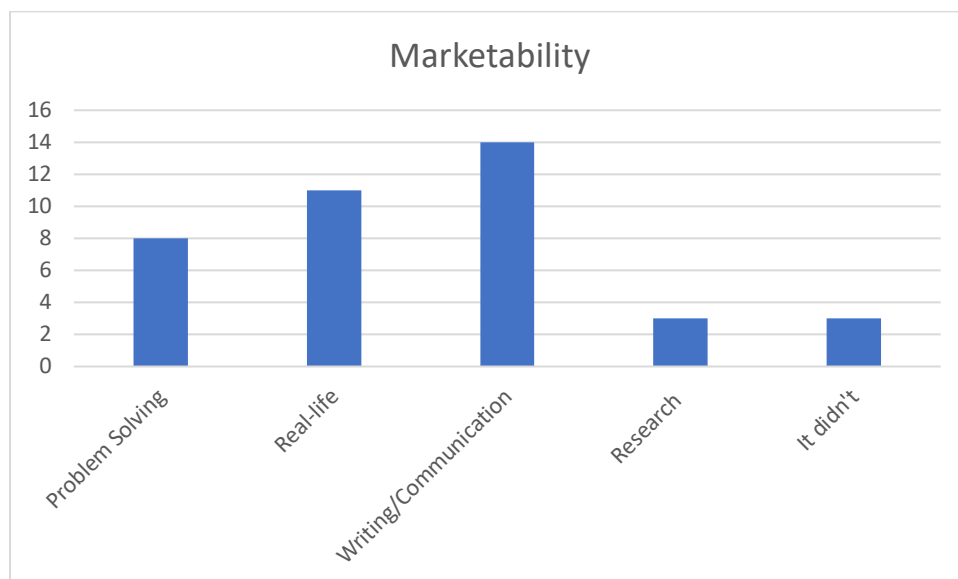
One student did feel as though their skills did not improve during the course of the project, but the rest of the student answers did at least suggest that there was general improvement when they had completed this client project.

The author was pleased to note how aware the students were of their improvements in these specific skill areas.

RQ 3: How do students feel that working for a real client made them more marketable?

Students noted that the way they feel they are more marketable to an employer is:

- Problem solving
- Valuable/real-life experience
- How to do research
- Writing/communication skills



Most students commented that they felt working with a real client in a real writing situation helped them improve those marketable skills. It was clear that this was very important for our students. For example, one student noted:

“I believe this project has made me more marketable as we can say that we have worked with an actual client. An employer usually likes people with experience so if you show that you have worked with an actual client and the client liked what you had to say, you would most likely get the job over someone with no experience.”

Similarly, another student noted,

“One way that this project made me more marketable to an employer, I believe would be being tasked to deal with a real-world scenario with a real client. A paper for a nonprofit organization that actually exists and not just really for school but for the community as well.”

The largest number of responses in this group had to do with an improvement in their writing and communication skills. One student noted, “This project has made me more marketable to my employer because I have upgraded my communication skills and can now write various business reports.” Students seemed to appreciate that real-life writing experience, as well as receiving client feedback.

Similarly, some students felt that the most helpful marketable skill was their ability to problem-solve: “It has given me experience with solving a problem for a client through research and business meetings.” Working with clients can be tricky- people can change their minds and may not like everything that is presented to them. Working through this very real process can give students important life skills.

Discussion

The significance of student motivation is not one to be taken lightly. When students are highly motivated, it can make such a large difference in their work and how much they put into it. The results from this student survey show that the students actually felt more motivated to work harder for the client, especially once they realized that their work would possibly be used in the community if the client liked it. They all wanted their work to be featured by the client.

As a business communication instructor, the author was thrilled to see so much discussion from the students about their actual writing process and how they felt it improved during the ACE experience. Not only did students feel as though this real-life writing experience was crucial to their professional development, but they actually noticed specific improvements within their writing.

It is also integral for students to understand how this type of client-based experience can help them become more marketable in the future. The students who have had this experience are bringing more to the table than students who have never worked closely with a client. Business majors who have not previously had much work experience can bring this to their next interview and can put their projects into a portfolio to show.

CONCLUSION

This study was limited to only those students who chose to participate out of the two business communication classes, and only from one client-based assignment in that semester. However, anonymous student feedback can be helpful and can be used to gauge how students work with and understand client projects. It is the author’s hope that the findings from this project can be used to inform more student engagement with ACE or other client projects.

Overall, the findings suggest that students’ experiences with this client project helped increase their writing skills and their motivation to complete the project well. Student found value in writing and creating a real project for a real client in the community. It did not hurt that the class client also wanted to showcase the student work and put it to use in the community, not only at tabling events but also in their re-sale shop.

The findings here are similar to Hickman, Stoica, and Price’s 2021 study, “Through our observation, it is evident that this multicourse, client-based project applies pressure to students to perform at a higher level and to produce higher-quality work” (p. 103). Students were more highly

motivated to complete excellent projects for the client after they met her and were inspired by how much incredible work she does for the community.

Moving forward, future research can focus on how online academic and community engagement projects differ from in-person projects, and how that can impact the student experience. More research should also be conducted on how to set up an ACE project effectively in an online course to ensure it runs smoothly.

Based on the feedback from these students, it is clear that students felt this was an impactful learning experience for them in the business communication classroom. The author hopes that the students will take these meaningful ACE experiences with them as they continue on to the workplace.

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Appendix A

BUAD 3335, Unit 3

Final Project: Assignment #5 The Business Report (ACE group project)

(200 pts)

Rhetorical Context- This will be a project for the women's shelter. The women's shelter, started in 1984, is a non-profit organization that provides "crisis intervention, advocacy, and support services empowering abuse survivors to seek new beginnings and rebuild lives free from the effects of violence. They provide services to all victims of family and sexual violence." The women's shelter also runs a resale store (formerly Elite Repeat) that helps fund the organization through donations.

Currently, the Women's shelter is understaffed and underfunded. One of their main needs is up-to-date research and materials that they can use when talking to various audiences. They need materials to give to teens, women, college students at the university, and the general community. They also need recruitment materials. We will be gathering up-to-date secondary research for them to help them reach out to various audiences in the community. Each group will choose a topic that they feel is important to share with the community (with a specific audience) and create a visual to go along with it (using the Style Guide available on BB).

Our client is asking each group to

- Create **community outreach materials** for services that they offer, including the resale store, the shelter, counseling services, and advocacy.
- Or
- Create **recruitment materials** for these positions: residential/house manager, sexual assault advocate, special services advocate, community relations coordinator, advocacy intern, and/or marketing intern

Purpose/ Learning Objectives-

1. Apply business communication strategies and principles to prepare effective messages for domestic and international business situations.
2. Use analytical and problem solving skills typical in business communication.
3. Construct clear, logically organized messages using accepted standards of American English grammar, mechanics, and business style.
4. Conduct research and compose a documented business report.

Task- For this project, your group will conduct research on outreach to help solve their business problem: how to reach out to various community members about the services that they offer and the positions that they have available. Your final report presents the findings of your research (interviews with the client, outside research, etc.) to the client. Your goal in writing the report is to help our client and to give them specific and actionable recommendations. Note that your audience is not your instructor, but the client – this is why the assignment can also be referred to as an *external* report.

The 8-10 page report should include:

- Title page
- Table of Contents

- Executive Summary
- Introduction with a clear research question
- Description of your research methods (primary and/or secondary)
- Discussion of major findings and implications of those findings
- Recommendations and conclusion section
- References page (APA)
- Appendix (if needed)

Please note, the title page and Table of Contents are not included in the 8-10 pages. This business report should be written in a serif font, 1 inch margins, and double spaced. The example in the book that you will find most helpful will be the past student example posted on BB. You should tailor your report to your particular audience, just as you will do in the workplace.

Visual Deliverable (50 pts)- Your group will also create one visual document for our client, based on your research. This can include a flyer, brochure, Facebook post, poster, radio commercial script, etc. The group will need to decide who the specific audience for the deliverable is.

Examples include, but are not limited to-

- A bilingual flyer (Spanish/English) for the SAAFE Shoppe for community members
- A poster to hang up on campus to let college students know about the counseling services that Women's shelter provides or the internship opportunities
- A brochure/bookmark that shares the signs of dating violence to be handed out on campus
- A script for a 30 second commercial to air on the local radio station, letting the community know about the name change for the resale shop
- A Facebook post about the services that Women's shelter provides for sexual assault or family violence survivors

Due Date-NA . (Extra credit if turned in before that day).

Evaluation Criteria- Please see the accompanying rubric on BB.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danica Schieber is an Associate Professor of Business Communication at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, TX. She earned her BA in English from Austin Peay State University, her Masters in Technical Communication from Minnesota State University Mankato, and her PhD in Rhetoric and Professional Communication from Iowa State University. She is also the Academic and Community Engagement Coordinator for the College of Business Administration. Her research interests include community engaged scholarship, rhetorical analyses of CEO's language, and transfer theory.