Using writing in a service learning project

Service Learning is “meaningful community service that is linked to students’ academic experience through related course materials and reflective activities.” --Edward Zlotowski, Senior Faculty Fellow at Campus Compact and leading proponent of service learning

How can faculty use writing assignments to help students have a successful service learning experience?

- **in the spotlight**, students create useful, professional documents for a local non-profit organization
- **behind the scenes**, students reflect on their service learning work.

This poster shares what I’ve learned over 10 years of teaching a service-learning component in a professional writing class.

**Writing in the spotlight**

Helping students create professional-quality documents.

- **Connect to a Community Partner**
  Before the term begins
  - Seek a non-profit organization in our neighborhood that needs to have documents written or revised
  - Enlist help of campus service-learning coordinator to find potential matches for project
  - Determine fit
    - do their needs match the scope of course?
    - do they have someone willing to be contact person for students?

- **Learn about the organization**
  As part of the course, students
  - study and write about organization’s website and other publicly-available documents
  - visit the organization for a tour and/or volunteering experience
  - meet with contact person for information and brainstorming session
  - with the contact person, decide on several documents for class teams to produce.

- **Set up writing and rewriting tasks**
  Course design is set up so that each team
  - learns through course materials about the purpose, audience, style, and approach of the type of document they are writing
  - writes a proposal for their document
  - creates a PERT chart to plan, organize, and keep track of work on document.
  - uses class time to meet with team, coordinate out-of-class work, and work on document
  - has clear deadlines for drafts as the document project progresses
  - creates a final presentation to the organization about rhetorical choices made in the document

**Writing behind the scenes**

Helping students reflect on the service learning activity.

“Reflection describes the process of deriving meaning and knowledge from experience and occurs before, during and after a service-learning project. Effective reflection engages both service-learning leaders and participants in a thoughtful and thought-provoking process that consciously connects learning with experience. It is the use of critical thinking skills to prepare for and learn from service experiences.” National Service Learning C (QR code)

- **Why have reflective writing assignments for service learning projects?**
  They help students
  - examine critical issues related to service-learning project
  - understand the connection between service learning and classroom work
  - develop civic values
  - find personal relevance in the work

- **When should students do reflective assignments?**
  Before, during, and after the service-learning project to allow for feedback from instructor and classmates. See NSLC website for guidance (QR code)

- **What kinds of reflective assignments can students do?**
  - Memo to instructor before project starts
    - summarize non-profit’s core messages on website and other materials
    - self-report: past experience with non-profits, outside of campus, etc.
  - Online forums as work progresses
  - mid-term memo on group’s progress, obstacles
  - Final memo
    - connections between course work and service-learning
    - analysis of collaboration
    - what was satisfying, what was more difficult than expected
    - summary/comments on student’s first memo

Jane Claspy Nesmith
Adjunct Assistant Professor
Rhetoric Department
Coe College
jnesmith@coe.edu