

# Chapter 10. How Long Have We Been Doing This Again? Establishing a Long-Term Interdepartmental UX Collaboration on Campus

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**Abstract.** This chapter offers a picture of a multidisciplinary UX collaboration on a university campus that benefits students in an upper-level professional and technical writing course, as well as departments across the university. We also offer recommendations for colleagues beginning their own interdepartmental collaborations on campus and share sample materials for reuse or adaptation in similar courses at other universities.

Since Fall 2015, we've worked on a client-based collaborative project housed in a professional and technical writing minor course that tests the usability of our university's department websites. Although this type of client-based project often involves clients who are external to the university, we have found that this internal, interdepartmental collaboration can offer at minimum equal benefits for the students and clients involved. In our collaboration, we respond to a call from Therese M. Judge (2006), who urged faculty teaching upper-level writing courses to find opportunities for students to partner with departments across campus. We also build on the work of other teacher-scholars in technical communication, who have urged us to find ways to incorporate hands-on usability experiences for our students to prepare them for the changing workplace (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016) and to be rhetorically engaged citizens (Scott, 2008; Bartolotta et al., 2018). Our project also involves multidisciplinary collaboration at multiple levels: not only do we (the facilitators) come from different university departments and areas of expertise, the students in the course also come from a wide range of majors and possess a variety of strengths that contribute to the success of the collaboration.

In the sections that follow, we'll share information about our project and offer recommendations for colleagues beginning their own interdepartmental collaborations on campus. We also share sample assignments and course structures for adaptation or reuse in similar courses.

## ■ But First, Who Are We?

Ashley teaches the upper-level technical writing and usability class in which this project is housed. She coaches students through the day-to-day elements of the project, including issues with collaboration, project management, working with clients and users, usability research methods, and analyzing the data. She grounds students in the theory and practice of user experience and usability, ensuring that they understand the importance of what they are doing in this project.

Until her departure from West Chester in late 2021, Kristin worked as part of the university's web team, which develops, maintains, and supports all of the university's websites. She served as the class' point of contact for the web team and department clients. In this role, she represented department website goals to the students in the class and communicated the website's user needs to the web team and its department clients.

## ■ Why This Partnership Matters

This partnership has high stakes for our campus. University websites are a primary method by which current and potential students learn information about their programs, as well as critical information about campus resources and deadlines. First-generation college students are even more likely than their peers to seek information from university websites (Grim, et al., 2021), and approximately 30 percent of our university's students are first-generation students. This combination of factors makes the quality of our websites an equity issue on campus. More, our university is a regional comprehensive public university that primarily serves residents of our state: approximately 85 percent of our undergraduate students are in-state residents (West Chester University of Pennsylvania Institutional Research, 2021), with most of the remaining student population attending from an hour or less away. Through improving the university's communication and outreach to residents who wish to attend the university, our collaboration has directly helped our institution achieve its mission of serving our state.

Keeping the usability testing on campus has an immediate impact on students, as well. The course's students, who mostly come from the campus' professional and technical writing (PTW) minor or various computer science programs, gain valuable projects for their portfolios. Even more importantly, they are deeply invested in the projects as ones that will have an immediate impact on their own lives and on the lives of their friends and classmates. The students in the class also know that the university is responding to their concerns about key department websites through this collaboration. Even when students have a steep learning curve regarding usability, those connections to their peers and to their clients encourage them to remain active in the project. In this way, too, our collaboration contributes towards our university's mission to educate citizens who are deeply engaged with their communities.

## ■ Project Structure

In this section, we describe the specific contexts of the collaborative usability project and, when appropriate, connect to a Creative Commons-licensed version of the course documents. It's also important to note that this project has not always been structured in the way we describe below. It's grown significantly—expanding from a single, four-week unit in the course into a semester-long project that has completely reshaped the course itself—as we've learned more about our own collective strengths, our students' varied needs and background knowledge, and our department clients' needs. As we've gotten more skilled and more comfortable in working together, we have been able to respond to our contexts in a way that simply wouldn't have been possible back in 2015.

## ■ Introducing Key Concepts for the Course

Each iteration of the course begins with an individual website analysis assignment designed to familiarize students with usability concepts. This project provides critical scaffolding, given that few students enter the class with any exposure to usability (and sometimes even without prior exposure to professional writing classes). It also allows Ashley to identify and support any students who are struggling with usability, before those individual difficulties are hidden in the collaborative work.

To prepare for their website analysis, students read introductory works from the now-archived Usability.gov, professional and technical writing scholars focused on usability, industry professionals, and accessibility experts; more specific information about the readings throughout the course can be found in our sample calendar. Students also analyze and discuss case studies, including ongoing analyses of Instagram and recent website accessibility lawsuits, to understand *why* these details are so important. To assess their knowledge of these introductory concepts, students review the usability and accessibility principles of a website of their choice (or a nonprofit or research partner website when available, such as the local National Writing Project site). This project helps students learn concepts like the five elements of usability, as well as how to focus on website issues that are actionable. More, the project helps them understand the importance of usability and UX and become more critical, informed users of the websites they encounter on a regular basis.

## ■ Shifting into the Collaborative Project

At the end of the website analysis assignment, students begin to learn more about the practice of collaboration: how to handle difficult conversations and situations, what it feels like to research and write together, and how to manage a larger project such as the one they're about to begin. Ashley then

divides students into groups based on a combination of individual schedules and strengths; the goal here is to eliminate one of the biggest challenges for collaboration among students, many of whom work at least one part-time job, commute over half an hour, and/or are caring for family members. Though students have significant time in class to work together on the project, they still need at least one common hour a week outside of class to meet, conduct tests, or complete other tasks during the project. Students then formalize their expectations and guidelines through a team plan.

Then, Kristin or another member of the Web Team meets with the whole class to discuss how the Web Team works with department clients to develop their websites, balancing the importance of usability and accessibility with the department's own goals for the website. She also introduces the department websites that the student groups will be testing that semester, and these websites usually represent a mix of academic departments (e.g., biology and music) and administrative departments that affect students across the university (e.g., financial aid and undergraduate admissions). These testing goals for these sites also vary: some clients' sites have been recently restructured and need feedback on a new iteration, while others are preparing for an upcoming site redesign. Each group gets to pick its websites out of a hat, with the opportunity to trade if the students wish to do so. If there are more client websites than groups, the remaining websites become in-class practice sites, so that those clients can also receive at least informal feedback on their websites to accomplish their goals.

## ■ Focusing on User Needs and Goals

As soon as each group has its assigned website, Ashley focuses on the different users their websites might have and what their needs are, using the contextual questions from St.Amant (2018) as a framework for the discussion. What tasks might users need to accomplish with that website? In what contexts do they encounter the websites? How might those user needs change over time? Then, students learn how to create effective tasks for study participants to complete, and they practice writing tasks for their assigned website. The user analysis and task development each become a smaller assignment that contributes to the larger usability report.

The class also discusses best practices for recruiting participants, and students learn about the challenges they might face in terms of that recruitment. Students then compose recruiting scripts for different audiences—including classmates, friends, faculty, and staff—and analyze the differences in each approach. Once the scripts are ready, groups can begin recruiting participants for their tests. Ideally, each group's participants represent a range of their assigned website's users. In some cases, this isn't possible, due to a lack of access to incoming students or perhaps a lack of participation from faculty or staff.

## ■ Usability Testing

Following J. Blake Scott's (2008) call for more hands-on student experience with usability methods in the classroom, Ashley creates space in several class meetings for students to practice different usability methods, such as card sorting, focus groups, system usability scales, and more. Students learn about the kinds of information each method can provide, the limitations of each method, and the need to balance both quantitative issues (such as "how long does it take to answer the question?") with qualitative details such as user satisfaction with the site. Ashley also models how to facilitate usability testing, with students taking turns being a participant or a facilitator. This practice helps the students troubleshoot their processes before any facilitation issues affect their testing data, and it helps them differentiate between their own status as facilitators and sometimes-users of the websites they are testing and that of the participants whose varied perspectives they need to learn. As Bartolotta and colleagues (2018) note, this differentiation can be challenging for students coming to usability testing for the first time, making this in-class facilitation practice crucial.

As the project continues, student groups design their own usability tests using a range of methods that address usability and accessibility. Then, they run those tests with their participants, focusing on content, organization, site architecture, and user satisfaction. Along the way, students contact Kristin or another member of the Web Team if they find items that require immediate correction (e.g., broken links or incorrect information). Communication is primarily via email at this stage, and that communication could be initiated by Ashley or by students in the class.

Once testing is complete, the students bring the data back to class and look for patterns as a group. As a class, students discuss how to report results and develop actionable recommendations. Then, the groups develop detailed usability reports for their assigned websites and present their findings and recommendations to department clients and representatives of the web team at the end of the semester. This presentation is key: it asks students to take the full project seriously, and it reminds them that the university is listening to their concerns through the enthusiastic attendance of the Web Team and department representatives.

## ■ What We've Learned

Each of us considers this partnership both sustainable and successful. As we prepare to enter the eleventh year of the partnership during the 2025–2026 academic year, we'd like to share a few takeaways for colleagues who might be interested in developing a similar project at their own universities.

## ■ Give Your Collaboration Time

When our collaboration began, we were both still new to our roles on campus,

and we didn't know each other well. As a result, early iterations of the project were a little awkward, with each of us trying to figure out what would work best without stepping on each other's toes. Now, when Kristin or another member of the Web Team comes to visit the class at the beginning of each semester, one of us invariably asks the other, "How long have we been doing this again?" More, the time we've both invested in the collaboration has given us the ability to communicate openly about what's working and what isn't each semester. It's a partnership that now works so well that we sometimes forget all that we've invested to make it work.

Part of why it works so well is that we have different skills and backgrounds. Kristin brought the technical knowledge of implementing the recommendations, as well as an understanding of navigating the department clients' needs, and Ashley brought an in-depth knowledge of structuring professional writing research projects and teaching client-based writing. Neither of us could do this project alone. In this way, our collaboration mirrors that of the students each semester. Students come to the class from a variety of majors and minors, including computer science, English, communication studies, and/or the professional and technical writing minor. Thus, the students bring varying knowledge about web development and writing in plain language to their own collaborative usability tests.

Our familiarity also benefits students. Because students come to the class with varying levels of UX and usability knowledge, having a well-maintained partnership between the instructor and client representative eliminates an additional possible source of friction. They are then free to focus on grappling with the concepts and developing effective tests, rather than worrying about potential miscommunication between new collaborators.

For faculty and staff collaborating on UX projects at their own campuses, we recommend being patient with each other and with the process. Though faculty might be used to preparing students for collaborative projects, a partnership like this one might be new to you. As with any collaboration, some early awkwardness is to be expected. Check in with each other regularly, especially during the first iteration of the partnership, to ensure that everyone's needs are being met.

### Keep Personnel as Consistent as Possible in the Beginning of the Collaboration

Ashley initially taught the course every semester out of necessity: the few other faculty members who could teach it were needed to teach other courses. However, that necessity offered an unexpected benefit: consistency in our collaboration. We've now grown comfortable enough with the project to be able to rotate our roles out: other faculty members have taught the course when Ashley was needed in other roles, and other members of the web content team have taken on Kristin's original role in the project now that she has left the university. It's clear from

recent iterations of the project that we established a sustainable structure and comfort level that other folks can adopt and/or update as needed. This simply would not have been possible if other faculty members rotated into the course regularly at the beginning.

If you're considering a project like this one, we recommend keeping the personnel as consistent as possible in early iterations of the course. If you switch out personnel while you're still navigating early awkwardness, you will likely struggle to develop the familiarity that a truly deep, sustainable partnership requires.

## ■ Set Up Project Parameters Early in the Semester

In the early years of this project, students focused heavily on certain findings that simply couldn't be changed without a wholesale revamp of the website—for example, the placement of a contact button or the website search bar. Once we realized this, we filed the feedback for the next significant website rebranding, and we began to discuss what would and wouldn't be actionable in this situation early on every semester. Now, students can note these details if they emerge during user testing, but they're not positioned as time-sensitive within their reports. We've also learned to encourage students to report time-sensitive details (such as broken links) *before* completing their reports; doing so gives the Web Team action items that can be completed during the same semester. Students can then see their changes implemented in real time, giving them even more of an investment in the project.

When planning a partnership like this one, we recommend setting aside time for the staff partner to visit the class early in the semester: this allows the staff partner to establish project parameters at the beginning of the project. We also recommend consistent communication of time-sensitive information so that those issues can be corrected during the semester.

## ■ Scaffold the Coursework Appropriately for Your Students

Despite many of our students coming to the class from the PTW minor or computer science programs, many of them have no prior experience with usability or user experience. Some students even come to us with no prior professional and technical writing courses: for these students, the course fills a general education writing requirement or is an elective option within their major or minor program. The variety in backgrounds can be a strength when students get to the collaborative project; however, it presents an initial challenge for all of the students, who may need to know more about usability, web writing, and/or working with clients. Thus, we each must do a *lot* of scaffolding with students to ensure that they're prepared to discuss their findings with clients in a confident and professional manner. This kind of preparation isn't unique to this project; as Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch (2001) and others have noted, it's essential to any client project



our students prepare. We have certainly found this to be true: As we have devoted more time to scaffolding and expanded the scope of the project, students' website recommendations have become richer, more clearly rooted in solid research, and easier to justify and implement for department clients. More, students are more comfortable interacting with the faculty and staff as experts themselves, and they're better prepared for handling challenging clients in future workplace situations.

If you're considering a project like this one on your campus, factor in your local contexts. Which students would be most likely to take this course, and why? What previous exposure have they had to UX, usability, or technical writing? These responses will help you scaffold the work in a way that is appropriate for your students. For us, we needed to build significant scaffolding for students to ensure the work was appropriate and useful for our department clients; in fact, we needed the full semester to give students the space to do the project well. If you work primarily with students who have previous exposure to UX & usability concepts, you may be able to build this project into half of a semester—or you may wish to continue with a full semester schedule and allow students to further develop skills in a related area (e.g., client presentation skills).

### Limit Department Client Involvement Early on, but Encourage Them to Visit Presentations

Students found it harder to develop recommendations when clients visited at the beginning of the project: they felt more obligated to be kind and understanding of the clients' needs in a way that wasn't always productive for website critique. More, the students may have felt a power imbalance, as most department clients were faculty or department chairs who could have some impact on the students' college careers. However, it's clear that the department clients shared the same goals as the students themselves: improving these critical websites for their users. They *wanted* to be involved. The challenge for our collaboration, then, was balancing our desire to include our clients while offering students the space they needed to learn about the departments and test the websites.

We have found that the best results and recommendations have emerged when students are positioned as user advocates from the beginning, with Kristin or another member of the Web Team serving as the point of contact for department clients. Direct student-client contact is thus limited; however, indirect communication occurs throughout the project via Ashley and the Web Team, and students recruit members of the department community as participants. By the time students meet the website clients for presentations at the end of the semester, they are fully confident in the research they have completed and can recommend even significant changes to the website. This structure has been beneficial for our already over-stretched clients, too: they get to see the students as experts in how users interact with the department's website, and it limits the



amount of time our clients are required to contribute throughout the semester. They appreciate our attempts to be mindful of their time: when department clients redesign their websites, they frequently ask to have the class retest their sites.

If you're developing a partnership like this one on your campus, we recommend limiting client involvement at the beginning of the project. This choice allows students to develop the abilities and confidence they need to persuade their department clients. It also respects the time of your department clients, a strategy that encourages those clients to have their sites tested in multiple iterations of the course.

## ■ The Partnership Evolves

This partnership is one that has proven to be sustainable, despite changes in personnel and even through changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since we began writing this chapter, Kristin has left the university for a position in industry, and one of her former Web Team colleagues has taken on her original role in the partnership. In addition, two other English department faculty with expertise in web writing and user experience now regularly rotate in to teach the course when Ashley is not available. Our early emphasis on collaboration and trust has proven critical during these personnel changes: they've allowed us to respond quickly to the awkwardness of changes to the course, to the personnel, and to the very foundations of higher education.

More importantly, that emphasis has allowed us to react quickly and effectively to the most dramatic shift in the course since our partnership began: the shift to remote learning that occurred in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. On March 10, 2020, West Chester University announced that instruction would be remote for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester (Fiorentino, 2020), and we remained in this mode through the entirety of the 2020–2021 academic year, even after other universities returned to in-person learning. Despite changes in instruction modality, as well as the significant pressure of teaching and learning during a pandemic, the collaboration—and students' course experiences—remained strong. Though neither author was involved with these iterations of the class, the faculty and staff who were involved with the course during remote learning leaned on the field's existing strengths in online pedagogy and distributed collaboration to help the collaboration succeed: they relied on existing strategies to help students connect in online learning and incorporated technologies that offered robust features for online collaboration (e.g., Slack, Discord, and Zoom).

## ■ What's Next?

Given the scope of recent changes to the collaboration—new personnel, new mode of learning, a global crisis that has affected both physical and mental health—it would be unsurprising if our now eleven-year partnership had failed along the way.

Happily, that hasn't been the case. Instead, with each new person who joins the partnership, as well as each new challenge that occurs, we learn new strategies to improve the course and make our collaboration richer and more sustainable. Although teaching this class remotely during the pandemic was not an easy task, student response to the format was positive: they appreciated having dedicated time to work together remotely to complete the usability research, and they were equally excited to add more workplace technology to their skillsets. Given that response, Ashley is now working with colleagues in the professional and technical writing minor to develop a permanent, hybrid face-to-face/online iteration of the course.

We're also thrilled to say that the work of students in the course is having a significant impact on the overall university website. Higher-order structural concerns that student groups identified through their research were addressed in recent (Fall 2021) major updates to the university's website branding and template. We anticipate that as departments continue to update their sites to take advantage of the new template, students in the course will provide feedback at multiple stages of the revision process. The new branding also means new testing based on changing user needs and priorities. Given the dramatic shifts in both due to the ongoing pandemic, updated testing is particularly essential for every academic and administrative department.

If you're interested in learning more about the course that supports this partnership, we offer assignment instructions, a sample course calendar, and more in a Google Drive folder at <https://tinyurl.com/4u29aunu>. All of these documents are licensed under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA, meaning that you are welcome to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, as long as you credit Ashley as the creator of those works. We also welcome conversations about similar partnerships and encourage you to reach out to us if you have questions.

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