Chapter 11. Forming and Sustaining One Collaborative Service-Learning Partnership Around UX

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Abstract. This chapter describes the processes for setting up, managing, and maintaining a relationship with a community partner/client that yields valuable experiences for students and clients as they engage with concepts and tools of user experience (UX). It also presents five key takeaways from the lessons we learned through this experience that confirm ground and extend previous research.

In Spring Semester 2021, the technical writing classes I taught, both online and on-site, began participating in a user experience (UX) project to test the usability of our university library's website. They approached the project from a student user's perspective using tools and methods common to UX. We treated the experience as a client-centered service-learning project with a group of librarians, The Library Website Board, as our client. The students work in teams through online communication platforms to conceive, plan, propose, coordinate, execute and deliver their own UX study for the client in both written form and via remote presentation. The approach to service learning through UX offers significant value pedagogically, experientially, and it has produced actionable insight and usable data for the client. This article is an account of the formation of the partnership and the lessons learned in the first two iterations of this mostly online arrangement. There are more lessons, of course, but here I discuss five of them:

- Get the insight and approval of the leadership on both sides of the collaboration.
- Properly serve and respect the needs of all stakeholders.
- Work out a schedule and expectations.
- Make the rewards for stakeholders tangible.
- Never not working; always plan ahead.

A Bit of Background

The project did not spring from my forehead fully formed and dressed for battle. It was *phronetic*—born of wisdom gained through experience—as I worked at it from both ends. I teach business writing, technical writing, technical editing, and new media & rhetoric classes as a full-time lecturer in a business and technical

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writing program housed in an English department. That department lives within the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, at a very high research activity university (R-1) in the Southeastern United States. The class rosters are typically capped at 20-ish students. Enrollments are majority white with a significant presence of Black, Latin*x*, Asian, and international learners. I also have many first generation and rural students. The class formats are a mix of online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses in a full-time teaching load of 15 credit hours per 16-week semester: four 3-credit courses and 3-credit hours of service to the department and the college.

Table 11.1. Project Schedule: October/November 2021

Week	Date	Due
8	Oct 4–10	UX Client Zoom Meeting + Release UX Tools (6th)
9	Oct 11–17	UX Audience Analysis (11th) UX Proposal (17th)
10	Oct 18–24	UX Progress Report 1 (24th)
11	Oct 25–31	UX Draft (31st)
12	Nov 1–7	UX Progress Report 2 (7th)
13	Nov 8–14	UX Progress CRC (14th)
14	Nov 15–21	UX Presentation (21st)
16	Last Class	UX Debrief Report (24th)

What We Do

I usually have two or three sections of the *Intro to Tech Writing* course. I divide each section into four teams, and each team has four to five students. This team size promotes the visibility and participation of each member: remaining small enough to be agile but robust enough to execute the labor the UX project requires. The project occupies weeks 8–14 of a 16-week term. We have a warm-up team exercise (Unboxing the Rubric in Week 2) and another smaller team project (WordPress Startup Guide in Week 5–6) before the UX project begins.

This scaffolded approach allows students to get to know their team members, come to understand basic roles of teamwork, and familiarize themselves with the communication platform Discord. These are all problems of preparing the students to meet UX for the first time and in a service-learning setting. This is not slavish nor dreaded labor for, as Dewey writes, "The difficulties that present themselves within the development of an experience are, however, to be cherished by the educator, not minimized, for they are the natural stimuli to reflective inquiry" (Dewey, 1910). My preparation translates to student learning and often to my own teaching innovation.

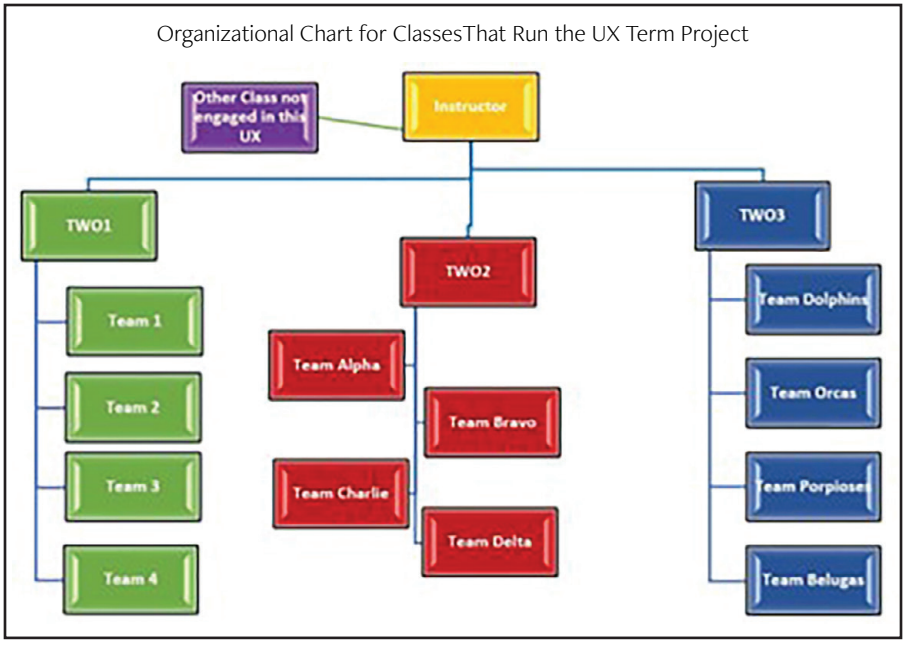

Figure 11.1: Organizational Chart.

When week 8 arrives, enough action and reflection has taken place in the front of the course that most team members are actively participating in their teams through a collective foundation of experience. At this point their familiarity with the tools of communication, the topics of the course, and some of the genres of writing permit them to start putting their skills to use in the UX Project.

Before the start of the term, I create a separate Discord *server* for each class section and invite the members to the platform in Week 2 during the *Unboxing the Rubric* activity. I chose Discord after formerly using Slack, Hangouts, Trello and Canvas because Discord seems to offer the most functionality in one place, presenting a simpler interface. Each server contains several *channels*:

- A general channel for text-based chat
- A Voice/Video channel for conferencing
- A Links & References channel for important reference information distribution from the instructor
- An Off-Topic channel for sharing interests and jokes to foster community

To make this scene more manageable for students, each team member profile is assigned a *role* as they enter the server with a role and the leaders get an additional *leader role* and a *specific team leader role*, which provides some extra permissions. The leader role affords all leaders access to the leaders' lounge: a place for leaders to share tips and tricks about leadership. The teams are also given private team space on a discord server that the instructor maintains. Each

team receives a chat channel for asynchronous communication and a voice/video channel for conferencing. Only members of a given team can see their teams' private channels. Only leaders can see the Leader Lounge. Being very aware of the complications surveillance can create, and out of respect for their workspaces, the instructor does not enter these private workspaces unless summoned by the team that owns the space. Even then, it is to answer that summons and then return to the default posture of supervisor/consultant. All class members can send direct messages (DM's) to all other members as well.

The UX project kicks off when the client releases the Call for Proposals (CFP) and I place it into Canvas. The CFP summons teams to a Zoom meeting by asking for two representatives from each team to attend the meeting. At the zoom meeting the Library Website Board (two to five members, one of whom is a SME for library web design), present their need and the scope of their areas of study. I act as a facilitator as team representatives make inquiries and seek clarifications.

When the meeting is complete, I release a link to a wonderful database that a student at my university developed. That database helps students locate, explore, understand, and select the tools that can answer the CFP, while staying within the scope of the area of study. Many students have never encountered user research, outside of the opinion survey, and they may require suggestions of tools that fit the research questions they develop. I tend to allow exploration and then suggest a few if choosing becomes too difficult. The Library Website Board has also offered their own pro-teams' data from tools such as HotJar, and their search history database as supplemental data. The UX Lab on Campus also offers many tools like GazePoint eye-tracking software & hardware, and observation rooms. Most recently, our clients offered four sites of inquiry from which our teams may choose.

Sites of Study

- Organization of supplemental study guides–often referred to as LibGuides
- User navigation to LibGuides and
- User interaction with The LibGuides
- Usability of the library website landing pages

The student research teams then select one of the proffered sites of study and write a proposal explaining how they will create a test for observation, select appropriate UX tools, gather participants, make observations, process and interpret data, and construct communications to deliver their results in written form and in multimodal format. I hold that critical thinking students engage in during the decisions about their study's design as a key threshold experience that must be lived, and cannot be downloaded. Teams will often observe volunteer participants that vary widely in demographic groups, from peers in other courses, to other college students, and even outsiders, depending on the type of user the team is interested in

most. As participants navigate the site of study, observations take place on Zoom, in a lab, or sometimes offsite in person, with researchers recording the participants' clicks and missteps, timing their successes, and noting their confusions. If the observations are conducted in person, then the teams designate on-campus students for that task and then process the data from the observations together. UX teams manage their own projects with Gantt charts, MS Teams, or Trello spaces as they work together on Google Docs and Office 365. They conference on Discord to compile their observations and make sense of what they witnessed. Teams are neither instructed to provide recommendations nor are they prohibited from doing so, as the data collection and interpretation alone is quite a robust learning experience. Even so, teams often construct wireframes to aid in presentation of suggested revisions for their site of study. Student groups have even made mock-ups using the snipping tool to rearrange visually and spatially the existing elements of their site of study to illustrate suggestions to improve user navigation.

In executing this project teams construct process documents including: a proposal, communication in formal emails, two progress reports, a draft, a final written report, a multimodal presentation, and a reflection/debrief report. The first progress report, the draft, and a debrief report are submitted only to the instructor, but the other deliverables are submitted to the clients. These submissions require responses. I offer critique on all of them.

As part of course prep, I also worked with the clients to construct form-letter response boilerplate that they could add a few lines to thereby minimizing the effort required on their part when receiving 12 copies of many of the deliverables over the course of the term. It must be noted that it can be very easy—because librarians are also teachers at heart—for them to expend too much time and effort in responding to the teams. This would tax them heavily and could easily spoil our partnership. Respect for the time of the client, and the students, does place an initial increased weight on the instructor until proper systems and materials have been developed to reinforce that value of respecting labor. We develop these systems and resources in meetings between clients and instructors as we attempt to maximize student-client contact but minimize client labor. Negotiating the proper amount of labor with the client—which approximates the involvement of a private client in the world who hires an outside UX analysis team to gather data on their user interactions—is imperative to the success of the project. It would be unethical to place too much labor on the client, while allowing too little would render the experience inauthentic for the students. The role of the instructor, before the project begins, involves consulting and planning with the client, just as well as acting as a consultant for the student researchers during the project.

This careful negotiation can help authenticate the experience for the student, but I do iterate frequently that every client has different needs and refer researchers frequently to their audience analysis from the beginning of the project as an important diagnostic tool. At the end of the project, the clients select and notify two to three finalists from the presentations and accompanying reports. All teams

receive a letter from the client with the finalists garnering a higher degree of personalization. The clients then post their Finalist Selections and a short write-up thanking the teams on the library's publicly accessible newsletter. This functions as a resume line for the participants.

Benefits of this Collaboration

Who benefits from this collaboration? That is a great question that I am often asked when I talk about this project, and it is a question that I wrestled with before the partnership was formed. The work involved in launching such a project is significant and the chances of sustaining a partnership less than certain. I considered three main stakeholders when I decided to pursue this radical pedagogical shift and added one more after the partnership commenced. The short answer is, everyone benefits.

Table 11.2. Stakeholder Benefits

Stakeholder	Benefits
Students	Immersion in a work-like setting, doing actual research for a real client, with the possibility of authentic documented outcomes.
Client	This client gets to serve their customer base while collecting valuable feedback on their current procedures, products, and services.
Instructor	The classroom becomes a site of study for the instructor as well as the environment for their teaching praxis.
University	Many studies rank family and friend recommendations very highly, as important influences in college choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Consistently, employers have ranked internships, volunteerism and work experience as top assets they seek (Thompson, 2014). This project can provide some exigence for creating these conditions. The cycle spirals upward when graduating students who came to the university based on the recommendations, or results, of friends find full employment, quickly and easily, and they in turn share that news with friends and family.

Lessons Learned

Both the problems and successes of this project have taught us about what makes a service-learning UX collaboration useful and what makes them full of "messy learning" (VanKooten & Berkley, 2016). It is hoped that these few considerations might save time, effort, and woe for a reader who is hoping to undertake a project such as ours.

Lesson 1: Get the Bosses Onboard

In our case, Michael Manasco and Doug Bolden, the lead clients, and I both sought the approval of our supervisors who were responsible for our academic

units and even invited them to some of the preliminary organizing meetings on Zoom, which they attended. Once they were convinced of the validity of the aims of the partnership, and the potential rewards for the students and the client, we were given the go-ahead. To attempt something as arduous as this project without support would be folly. And so, the lead clients and I laid the groundwork for the structure of the project together and then, without making any assumptions, approached the supervisors with the plan and a dream, instead of just a dream. With the offer of support from both academic units we felt confident to proceed.

Lesson 2: Be Mindful of the Stakeholders' Needs

1. **Client Needs:** Time seemed to be in short supply as we approached the second iteration of the project—and the surprise second-act of the COVID-19 pandemic—which made the clients reluctant to enter into a second iteration of the project, so, as a matter of pedagogical *praxis*, I began seeking ways to make their labor load lighter. First, we created form letters from the correspondence they created in the first run of the project and reduced the number of documents they needed to produce as clients, without harming the students' needs in the process. The client cannot become the instructor but rather must fulfill their part of this arrangement: a client with problems who is seeking data toward solutions. Importantly, it is also up to the instructor to model, for the team leads, the importance of the need to protect the clients' time.
2. **Students' Needs:** Most students have other classes and, increasingly, families and jobs in addition to their full course loads. I have tried to remain vigilant about making sure that the workload is distributed, and also that students learn to distribute it. I make it clear in the beginning of the project that this will be less academic and more like a work experience. I ask them to plan two to three hours per week for the labor that it will take to serve the needs of the client. I provide links to scheduler websites and ask them to find and agree on a common meeting time to hold meetings, and meeting minutes, each week for about 30 minutes or so to support their asynchronous communication on Discord with live updates, reports, and task assignments. As many students do not have experience in leadership roles, these have to be coached even as the concepts and tools of UX are introduced. Students may also need emotional support while learning to collaborate. The concept of labor-based organization is foreign to many and the idea of a class that asks for applied tacit and implicit knowledge can be bewildering when they have been largely engaged to this point with explicit knowledge through tests and quizzes. There is no value in hiding the differences in the kinds of tacit knowledge expected, the paths one can take to gain that knowledge, and the practices needed to perfect the employment of the knowledge. The instructor must be transparent about what

the students are supposed to learn and what they are supposed to do with what they learn. This transparency, and a little empathy, can help clear up the confusion inherent in exploring the hitherto unknown, liminal spaces that lay within the thresholds of new learning.

3. **Instructor's needs:** To be clear, in making this work I have violated some of my own needs and requirements. This course is normally the sort of course taught by a tenured or tenure-track professor and the experiences of a course like this one can drive research for them. For that sort of a situation, the overlap of research and teaching is productive and beneficial. A higher teaching load and no requirement—nor allotted time—for research forces a deficit of time upon the instructor. Since I very much enjoy teaching the courses however, I have borrowed time from other activities in my life. I have not shorted my family, but rather, have sacrificed much of my hobby and leisure time in exchange for the grading and commenting that always accompanies teaching writing-intensive classes. The group submissions on many of the deliverables do ease that stress somewhat later in the term but there are many extra hours invested in office hours, online in Discord, clarifying instructions, helping groups reach consensus, or providing extra genre models for some of the students.

Lesson 3: The Scheduling Thing is Critical

It is imperative to map out the deliverables, but equally essential to consider school calendars, client and instructor travel, and student workloads. Moving the final products for the UX project into week 14 and allowing weeks 15 and 16 for reflection, review, and portfolio construction shifts the most strenuous labor away from finals week and helps the students manage their time more easily. This shift also allows time for the clients to read and view all the submitted UX Reports before making selections from among them. The shift also provides the instructor with time to grade the products before final grades are due. The careful planning of deliverables also provides students with free time for semester breaks and with a schedule upon which to build their project management plan.

Lesson 4: The Reward for All Stakeholders Should Be Tangible

The rewards for the stakeholders are not merely byproducts of the process. By rewards here I mean tangible tokens. The sweat equity everyone invests in the project should yield a material benefit that the stakeholder can show to another person and say, "Hey! Look at this!" For the students in this case we have letters of thanks, and the teams that really excel have a publicly available document that praises their work. The clients get copies of the UX reports and the multimodal presentations that accompany them. The instructor receives the opportunity to do research and write. For a person with a PhD in rhetoric and writing, yes, this is a tangible reward.

Lesson 5: Always Keep Working and Thinking Ahead

Instructors should cultivate multiple partnerships to increase the project's flexibility. It is my plan to cultivate another partnership or two and then rotate them through. The hope in this move is to avoid undue stress on any one client-partner so that my welcome will not be worn out. One partner can only make fair and reasonable use of a certain amount of data and only at a certain frequency interval without the risk of becoming redundant and thereby unnecessary—a condition that devalues the data. Multiple client partners would present a greater selection of needs, and allow for a cooling period for each client-partner, in which, the repetition of data collection would become useful once more as a longitudinal interval and comparative analysis tool.

What's Next?

Like Troy Polamalu and Head & Shoulders, I am never not working. For the project: in the short term, the library client and I plan to re-sight our targeted sites of study and retire others recently completed. We can then move to a different site of study within the library website. I will also cultivate more partnership both across campus and off campus. I hope to continue this habit and run the UX Project with a client once per year in the Fall Term, changing sites of study after each iteration. This will in effect provide a longer cooling window for each site of study, even within the same client partnership. To supplement the Spring Semester, I would like to seek out smaller businesses who would like to have their digital footprint analyzed to see if it is making the impact they desire. Our UX project can offer this assistance even as the students explore the tools and methods of UX Studies. It is possible that these ties to the community could also prove to be beneficial to the university, and longstanding. In the way of campus partners, I have recently reached out to [our on-campus business incubator] to inquire if there is a place for us in their ongoing efforts.

In the classroom, I hope to narrow the selection of tools with a directed list based on the type of study the client needs each term. I am also of a mind to increase the reflections that the students do over the term, so that I can better monitor their foundational learning. It is clear that not all technical writing students will use their acquired skillsets in the same way, or for the same purposes, but it is conversely clear that the collaborative writing and the genres of writing that these students engage with in the UX project are transferable skills that are useful to them.

Since our university has a newly developed UX minor and a graduate certificate—logically these may develop further as time moves forward—I also see my UX project, in the third-year undergraduate technical writing course, as the toe-dip for students to check the UX studies water. This should present a river of opportunity at the confluence of the principles of lean technical communication

(Johnson et al., 2018) and core of service-learning sustainability (Cushman, 2002). Even so, I am mindful of the fact that rivers must be fed by streams, and similarly, students need to see the usefulness that research and writing can create together before they will wade into the current. This project can become a sustainable part of the ecology of my technical writing class. As I see students I have taught landing jobs, in part, because of the experiences they had in the UX project, and other projects like it, I can see other ripples the experience makes as my little stream rolls away to the sea, to eventually make the rain.

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