

3. Working with Ladies in UX: Building Academic/Industry Partnerships for User Research Projects

Heather Noel Turner
SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

Laura Gonzáles
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Liza Potts
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract. Research in technical communication and user-experience (UX) points to the value of building academic and industry collaborations and conversations (Browning, 2015; Cotugno & Hoffman, 2011; Gonzáles et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2018). However, academic research is not as accessible to industry practitioners as it should be, and more conversations are needed to foster successful and sustainable academic-industry partnerships (Andersen & Hackos, 2018; Bosley, 2002). In this chapter, we share a brief case study that outlines a research partnership among various stakeholders within two organizations: the WIDE Center at Michigan State University and Ladies that UX (LTUX), a global organization to support women in UX. We share challenges and opportunities of collaborating with international organizations, including the need to coordinate across contexts and simultaneously prioritize both university and industry goals and objectives through collaboration (Gonzáles & Turner, 2019). We also highlight lessons learned from engaging in feminist-driven UX research methodologies (Gonzáles, et. al, 2017; Shivers-McNair et al., 2019). Through this discussion, we suggest that UX research and application should be developed from dialogue among researchers and practitioners (Albers, 2012). Together, women leaders at both organizations researched and instituted methods of communication and organizational structures that support the growth and development of women professionals both in industry and academia.

■ About Ladies that UX

The professional organization involved in this collaboration was Ladies that UX, a group developed in 2013 as a global support network for women in user-experience who may not have immediate contact with other women in this profession at their local workplace. LTUX was created by Georgie Bottomley and Lizzie Dyson, two UX professionals who “loved their jobs” but had “doubts about where

other women in the industry were” (Ladies that UX, 2024). Georgie and Lizzie wanted to establish a space for women UX researchers to connect.

The first meeting for this organization took place in Manchester, UK in 2013. Since then, Ladies that UX has expanded into a global network that includes sister branches in 53 cities spanning 25 countries. Each branch has a local group of leaders and organizers that build on Georgie and Lizzie’s model. Local group leaders coordinate monthly meetups (F2F and remote), talks, presentations, and other events that allow UX professionals to come together and share ideas. The purpose of these meetups is to provide a low-stakes environment where women can ask questions, form collaborations, or simply be in the presence of other women in the profession without feeling pressured to speak up or perform (Ladies that UX, 2024).

■ About WIDE Research Center

In many ways, the structure of Ladies that UX echoes what is at the heart of the WIDE Research Center at Michigan State University. The WIDE Research Center focuses on researching and innovating experiences for emerging technologies in the digital humanities, including uses of social user experiences to solve social, cultural, and political problems; ways of constructing computational analytics for improving persuasive communication, and the need to create new forms of public engagement and democratic practice on a global scale. At the time of the initial LTUX collaboration, the three authors of this chapter worked at WIDE in different capacities. Liza is the director of WIDE, while Heather and Laura were graduate research assistants and are now both tenure-track professors and affiliate researchers with the center who have also established and lead UX projects and internship programs for students.

One of the WIDE’s key aims is mentoring and collaborating with early career scholars at Michigan State University and across the field. Graduate and undergraduate researchers working at the lab have opportunities for collaborating with both academics and industry professionals. Sometimes this work includes conducting research, working on grants, developing and facilitating technology design camps with and for marginalized youth, and co-authoring papers; other times this work includes architecting, designing, and writing for digital humanities projects such as Sherlockian.net and various digital platforms.

■ Working with Ladies that UX

WIDE’s collaboration with LTUX began in Fall 2015, when Georgie and Lizzie connected with Liza to request assistance understanding how the individual branches of their organization were working and how the organization as a whole could be more streamlined in working together. This initial email led to many more emails and Skype calls where the three of them talked about their

professional careers and pathways as part of understanding each other's perspectives and backgrounds. During the calls in particular, Georgie and Lizzie shared information about their work in the UX field, their initial reasons for starting up their organization, and the rapid expansion of LTUX. At the same time, Liza explained her background in industry and academia, and related research being done on women-led organizations in academic, industry, and fandom communities (Potts et al., 2018; Sullivan et al., 2015).

It became clear that this project would connect well to this work, especially given the time and space during which similar women-led organizations were taking off. And Georgie and Lizzie had an urgent need to learn more about their growing membership. In just two years, LTUX had expanded across the globe. Georgie and Lizzie wanted to learn more about how each individual branch saw themselves as a community, how each group was coordinating events, and how they as organization leaders could better support the work of each local branch. Thus, WIDE and LTUX worked collaboratively using a “recursive participatory mentoring model,” (Sullivan et al., 2015, p. 7), which foregrounds collaboration and co-development of research goals. We then collaboratively developed a study aimed at answering the following questions:

- How can local branches of LTUX be supported as they grow?
- Why are women professionals in user experience interested in joining local organizations?
- Why are women currently joining LTUX?
- What kinds of support are these women and their local leaders looking for as a group and from the global organization?
- What kinds of metrics for success can be used to measure organizational health at the local level?

Because the answers to all the questions are a part of an extended collaborative project, our brief case study here offers a limited snapshot.

A collaboration between WIDE and LTUX was critical in gathering the information necessary to answer these questions. As leaders of LTUX, Georgie and Lizzie hold valuable knowledge about their members and the values of the organization. WIDE, on the other hand, had the resources (including time, research assistants, and established research methods) necessary to design a research protocol that would provide valuable information for LTUX while also generating important research experiences for the WIDE researchers. Through collaborative discussions between WIDE and LTUX leadership, our team decided to co-design and conduct a 13-question survey via Typeform with LTUX leaders in 20 cities. Participants were recruited via a list of 113 local leaders compiled by the LTUX global leadership team and solicited via a notification in LTUX's monthly newsletter. The goal of the surveys was to learn how each unique LTUX branch functions—how their meetings were organized, who attended, and how each branch got funding. WIDE researchers then conducted follow-up interviews

with 12 of these leaders, both in person within the state and online through a combination of video and voice calls. Since the participants of this study also functioned as co-designers of the study, the study was exempt from IRB. The questions asked during the interview included and expanded on the questions asked in the surveys:

- What is your LTUX local group role (and title)?
- How many people are managing the group? (If more than one, what are their roles?)
- How did you get started with your LTUX group?
- When did you hold your first LTUX meeting?
- Who attends your meetings? Professionals? Students? Can you tell me about the diversity of this group?
- How do you communicate with your LTUX group members?
- What does a typical LTUX meet-up look like for you? (theme, discussions, setup, attendees, locations)
- What are your thoughts on the financial viability of LTUX as an organization?
- Would you like to talk to other LTUX leaders? How would you want that to work? How would this be useful to you?
- How do you communicate now with LTUX global?
- What information did you receive to get started? Was this information useful?
- Are you a member of other UX or women-centered groups? Which ones?
- What is your occupation? (e.g., user experience, interaction designer, etc.)
- Could you describe your experience with LTUX in a sentence?
- How much time do you spend working on your local LTUX group?
- Any general thoughts or feedback about LTUX?

During these follow-up interviews, researchers asked closed and open-ended questions to learn more about how LTUX members felt about their organization, the types of support each branch had and the types of support they still needed. In essence, the survey was intended to help us build an inventory of organizational models, while the interviews were intended to help us better understand the relationships among members at the local and global levels. The collaboration between academic and industry researchers helped all parties to develop more effective methods and protocols for answering the research questions. In addition, learning about organizational models helped the WIDE researchers to develop their own approaches to organizational infrastructure that would then help them in their own academic administration and leadership roles.

The WIDE team worked collaboratively with LTUX to develop questions for both the survey and the interviews and to analyze the data that was gathered through each stage of the process. The team met through Google hangouts and coordinated meetings with interviewees via email and Slack. These platforms

were already being used by both the WIDE researchers and by LTUX. Through discussions with Georgie and Lizzie, the WIDE researchers were able to get hands-on experience in negotiating researcher goals, objectives, and methods alongside an organization. While WIDE researchers had experience and training conducting field work, being in conversation and collaboration with LTUX leaders who were deeply invested in their organization and who wanted to get “big picture” feedback required the team to adjust their methods to fit both with best research practices and with a specific organization’s goals.

After collecting both the survey and interview data, WIDE researchers developed a report that threaded patterns across all datasets, presenting this report and coordinating a follow-up conversation with the organization leaders Lizzie and Georgie. In these instances, we as WIDE researchers and colleagues presented our data through feminist frameworks that would both honor our participants’ perspectives while respecting the work of our research collaborators. Following our debrief discussions, Lizzie and Georgie shared our collaborative results with members of the LTUX local branches, beginning the process of converting the results of the study into practical applications for LTUX.

■ Findings

In general, we found that local LTUX chapters wanted more communication with the main LTUX leaders, and that women were joining LTUX to share strategies for gaining fair pay and employment, learn about different areas of UX that they may not be exposed to in their jobs, and network with other women in the field. This case study offers a limited snapshot into our broader research questions. Stemming from these findings, in this chapter, we share practical and methodological strategies for TPC researchers interested in making partnership with UX industry collaborators. As a result of our collaboration, our project helped identify challenges and opportunities within LTUX. Here, we will share lessons learned from exploring how women-centered professional organizations are established, expand, and sustain themselves.

■ Cross-Organizational Communication

Through our interviews with LTUX leaders, we answered research question, “How can local branches of LTUX be supported as they grow?” Specifically, we learned that the majority of the organizers were confident in the leadership from the main organization, and most branch leaders reported positively about their relationship with Georgie and Lizzie individually. Each individual branch leader had some suggestions for improving communication within their own branches, mentioning that digital platforms such as Twitter were most effective when communicating about events or sharing information and using MeetUp to communicate with members.

Communication within the larger organization—with leadership and across branches—was noted for being less robust. The interviews revealed that LTUX leaders were interested in connecting with each other, and many indicated that they would appreciate more interaction with other groups than was currently occurring. For example, one interview participant mentioned that more communication among the international chapters of LTUX would be helpful, stating, “Since I’m already in touch with everyone in North America, already exchanging ideas and listening to some pitfalls, it would be good to have more international connections. Some people are just not in touch at all.” Gaining access to LTUX’s shared Slack helped Liza better understand these communication concerns, as their channels were mostly quiet. Many of these branch leaders reported that their time was short due to the many obligations they had as professionals, caretakers, and organizers. That lack of time could explain the lack of chatter across Slack; however, as Shivers-McNair and colleagues (2019) found, intersectional technofeminist technology design needs to account for invisible labor (such as “finding child care, work replacements, travel funding, family support, and other necessities”) invested into design processes in order to be sustainable (p. 52). Several interviewees referenced the labor needed to keep up the lines of communication between different LTUX chapters, with one interviewee referencing “the struggles of advancing your ideas in a collaborative environment when everyone is very busy.”

Other suggestions shared by interview participants included creating more cross-branch meetups, hosting more frequent check-in calls with the organization leaders, and seeking sponsorship or other types of support to help arrange different events that would support members of their organization. Etienne Wenger (1999) argued that such communities of practice (like LTUX) need mutual engagement in addition to a shared repertoire in order to be successful. These ideas could connect them to larger networks and provide a greater sense of community across the organization. For example, one interviewee mentioned that she had been sponsoring LTUX meetups in her area, and that “we can’t really do anything phenomenal without sponsorship support. I can’t give that much of an investment.” Learning about the communication breakdowns and successes within LTUX helped WIDE researchers to recognize the importance of consistent organizational communication across platforms.

■ Branch Organization and Taxonomy

Through our interviews with LTUX leaders, we also answered our research question, “What kinds of metrics for success can be used to measure organizational health at the local level?” Most LTUX branches operated as collectives rather than under hierarchical models with a single leader or director at the top. Leaders recognized and appreciated the roles of group members in organizing and forming directions for their groups and did not necessarily draw upon formal titles when discussing their roles. Many considered themselves organizers, noting that

they were able to keep their community moving forward because of their organizational and communication skills. For example, one interviewee explained, “I call myself an organizer. Giving any other kind of title imposes a kind of hierarchy and I don’t wanna do that.” Participants also had various names for their members, such as advocates or coordinators, with many organizers pointing to these names as part of their group’s ethos. Avery Edenfield (2019) articulated such differences between corporate businesses, conventional organizations, and cooperatives (“organizations owned and controlled by the people who use them”) (p. 376), noting the need for rethinking methodologies and expanding sites of TPC research. Although LTUX does not identify as a cooperative, there is a “yet-to-be articulated praxis of UX in cooperative work” (Edenfield, 2019, p. 386). This in and of itself is noteworthy and could be a place for more research. Women across branches described this non-hierarchical model as the most effective for LTUX projects, and they pointed to the fact that more research is needed to both document and expand these feminist leadership practices. As one participant mentioned, “I don’t wanna put myself in a sort of superior role. I’m just like, organizing this, and it’s gonna be what it’s gonna be. I don’t wanna be like I’m imposing my vision on people.”

Through conversations between WIDE and LTUX, the research team as a whole was able to develop questions for future research regarding feminist approaches to organizational infrastructure that can honor the labor of women leaders while also maintaining a non-hierarchical ethos in an organization (Shivers-McNair et al., 2019).

■ Outcomes for Academic Partners

The results of this collaboration brought benefits to various stakeholders, including LTUX and WIDE as an organization as well as to the individuals who participated in this project. The community itself was eager to engage during this research project and beyond. Senior UX women from multiple countries took time to mentor junior researchers as they also contributed to the research project.

Although this collaboration is in many ways a straightforward research project, the collaborative element and the connections between academia and industry fostered new and ongoing connections, collaborations, and considerations. For example, the WIDE graduate researchers got a chance to network with women in UX during the interview process. Structuring these kinds of networking opportunities and collaborations for students, especially female students on color, helps challenge ad hoc protégé models that rely on exclusive and invisible expectations about what kinds of mentorship paths are present and for whom (González & Turner, 2019).

After reporting to Georgie and Lizzie that LTUX leaders wanted more opportunities for networking, WIDE helped organize a networking event across three cities in Michigan. Women who work in UX as academics and industry

practitioners came together to share experiences and ideas. This event benefited the LTUX branches in Michigan (Detroit, Grand Rapids) looking to make connections and students at WIDE who wanted to connect with industry professionals. It provided a model for LTUX to think about cross-organizational events.

Furthering these partnerships, a leader of a local LTUX branch who was interviewed for this project later became a “Experience Architect in Residence” in the undergraduate degree program directed and designed by Liza. This collaboration led to other engagement and outreach programs sponsored by WIDE researchers Heather and Laura, when they were graduate students, which included a technology summer camp for Latinx and Indigenous girls that was implemented in following years. And, of course, there were outcomes relating to knowledge making and distribution in industry and academia. Through the data analysis and research report writing processes, junior researchers had the opportunity to present research to a professional organization—invaluable skills that would benefit future research projects. The project itself has been mentioned across several publications, and the authors are often asked to share ideas about industry/practitioner partnerships.

■ Implications for LTUX and Future Partnerships

LTUX also continued to evolve as an international organization and across local chapters. For example, chapters like LTUX Atlanta explicitly expanded their definitions of “ladies” to include “talented and intelligent women and non-binary individuals” (<https://www.meetup.com/Ladies-That-UX-ATL/>). LTUX Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and others have opened their membership from current UX professionals to “anyone curious about UX,” which could be a small, albeit indirect, step to mentor and support Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) in UX. As the scarce representation and inclusion of women of color in UX and in the technology industry more broadly has been documented (Kapor, 2018), more intersectional approaches to feminist mentoring are deeply needed. As Heather and Laura have reported, explicitly scaffolding “get to know each other” time before (and during) engaging in specific UX activities” helps individuals share their experiences, hesitations, and positionalities in a way that builds empathetic collaborations and can lead to further inclusion and sustainability (González & Turner, 2019). LTUX are currently working with an outside organization to manage people and processes.

■ Conclusion

This collaboration resulted in positive outcomes for each of our individual objectives, while also fostering relationships among the research group as a whole. While the logistics of a single research project are important, the most important takeaway for us is the networking that took place among various stakeholders involved in the project. As organizations shift both in industry and

academia, connecting individual people along common interests and commitments can bring some stability in constantly fluctuating environments. Aside from helping with the development of a single technology or the protocol for a single project, academic and industry collaborations in UX can help all parties involved to combine resources and knowledge to continue supporting up-and-coming professionals.

■ References

- Albers, M. J. (Ed.). (2012). *Human-Information interaction and technical communication: Concepts and frameworks*. IGI Global.
- Andersen, R., & Hackos, J. (2018, August 3). Increasing the value and accessibility of academic research: Perspectives from industry. *SIGDOC '18: Proceedings of the 36th ACM International Conference on the Design of Communication*, 5, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3233756.3233959>
- Bosley, D. (2002). Jumping off the ivory tower: Changing the academic perspective. In B. Mirel & R. Spilka (Eds.), *Reshaping technical communication: New directions and challenges for the 21st century* (pp. 27–39). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Browning, E. (2015, October 1–3). What's in it for all of us: Critical reflections on and best practices for an academe-industry partnership in Florida's socio-political context [Presentation]. 2015 Conference of the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (pp. 140). Utah State University, Logan, Utah.
- Cotugno, M., & Hoffman, M. (2011). Seeking a direct pipeline to practice: Four guidelines for researchers and practitioners. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 25(1), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651910380377>
- Edenfield, A. (2019) Research in cooperatives: Developing a politically conscious research methodology, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 28(4), 376–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2019.1621388>
- González, L., Potts, L., Turner, H. N., & Brentnell, L. (2017, August 11). Working with ladies that UX: Building academic/industry partnerships for user research projects. Proceedings of the 35th ACM International Conference on the Design of Communication, 29, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3121113.3121217>
- González, L., & Turner, H. N. (2019, October 4). Challenges and insights for fostering academic-industry collaborations in UX. Proceedings of the 37th ACM International Conference on the Design of Communication, 21, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3328020.3353921>
- Ladies that UX. (2024). About. Ladies that UX. <https://ladiesthatux.com/about/>
- McAlear, F., Scott, A., Scott, K., & Weiss, S. (2018). Data brief: Women of color in computing. Kapor Center/Center for Gender Equity in Science and Technology. <https://www.kaporcenter.org/publication/data-brief-women-and-girls-of-color-in-computing/>
- Potts, L., Beattie, M., Dallaire, E., Grimes, K., & Turner, K. (2018). *Participatory memory: Fandom experiences across time and space*. Enculturation Intermezzo.
- Robinson, J., Lanius, C., & Weber, R. (2018). The past, present, and future of UX empirical research. *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, 5(3), 10–23. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3188173.3188175>

- Shivers-McNair, A., Gonzáles, L., & Zhyvotovska, T. (2019). An intersectional technofeminist framework for community-driven technology innovation. *Computers and Composition*, 51, 43–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2018.11.005>
- Sullivan, P., Simmons, M., Moore, K., Melonçon, L., & Potts, L. (2015, July 16). Intentionally recursive: A participatory model for mentoring. SIGDOC '15: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual International Conference on the Design of Communication, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2775441.2814672>
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.