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Project Management Techniques for Service Learning Projects: Writing to Connect Academic and Professional Worlds

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Abstract

Service learning projects can be daunting–for both students and teachers. However, business communication teachers can adopt written documents from industry to manage these projects. As part of the service learning project, the management tools —*themselves written documents*— can capture student interest and help ensure project success.

Based upon a pilot test in a Spring 2006 advanced business communication course, this paper identifies project management documents for use in service learning projects. It demonstrates how these may provide instructors with both insights and methods to intervene, as needed. These project management documents also give students a means to manage their projects and to ensure accountability as they cross from academic to professional worlds.

Service Learning Project Background

As Co-editors Rebecca Worley and Marilyn Dyrud acknowledged in their preface to *Business Communication Quarterly's* June 2006 Focus on Teaching: Service Learning, Part I: "Students take more seriously and become more involved with projects that simulate real-world communication needs." (p. 184). Indeed, "service-learning makes communication—the heart of composition—matter, in all its manifestations…students and instructors feel a greater sense of purpose and meaning in the belief that their work will have tangible results in the lives of others." (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, Watters, 1997, p. 2).

In service-learning projects, at least the ones that provide "writing for the community," [1] the teacher serves as a high-level project leader of multiple teams. Project management documents can help the teacher manage— and they help students succeed in meeting project requirements *and* improving their professional writing skills. Project management

[1] The author of *Writing Partnerships* (2000), Thomas Deans, proposes a taxonomy describing three paradigms for community writing: writing *for* the community, writing *about* the community, and writing *with* the community. When students write *for* the community, they enter a client relationship with a nonprofit organization to produce workplace documents. If students write *about* the community, they are writing primarily academic documents that use service learning as reference sources. In the third category, writing *with* the community, students work with local activities and neighborhood residents in creating materials for public discussion—a type of literate social action, with writing serving as a means to a civic end. See especially pages 16-19.

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documents help network key personnel in a service learning project's success: students, instructor, and client.
The project management tools I used in a new advanced business communication course (Spring 2006) were documents that were written by individual team members as well as the teams themselves. Because we were working in the rapid pace of a ten-week quarter, having multiple documents written both by individuals and the team saved time yet still provided accountability. The documents included:

1. an "engagement" letter / memo of understanding (written by the project team leader)
2. a project workplan (memo and Gantt Chart developed by the team)
3. status report e-mails (written by each team member)
4. a style sheet for longer documents and PowerPoint or Website creation
5. a transmittal letter (written by a team member and signed by all)
6. a performance evaluation and project assessment (written by each team member and, possibly, the service-learning project's client)

Some service learning projects begin with letters of inquiry as students work to identify and secure a project (Bowdon and Scott, 2003, p. 65; Bush-Bacelis, 1998, p.22), but because we had a short ten-week quarter for this project, the students began in project teams created to address specific projects and clients.[2]

Documents Keep Students, Client, and Instructor Informed

After the team met with the client for the first time, the team created a team name and logo, which become part of the team's letterhead. The team's project leader wrote an "**engagement letter"** (or, if we had an internal client, it would be more of a "memo of understanding") that confirmed generally what the team planned to produce for the client's organization. Any specific preferences (like frequency of client-team meetings or status reports) were also confirmed here. The project team members and the instructor were given copies and were cc'd on the letter, inviting any needed clarification or revision to the project itself.

Within a week after the initial meeting and engagement letter, the team created a short **workplan or Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) and Gantt Chart**. These documents provided a concise plan of action that the team would follow, week by week, to produce promised products (in a business communication course, those products or "deliverables" are themselves written documents—a grant proposal, a new or re-designed website, a set of instructions, a PowerPoint presentation, etc.).

The WBS functions as a more detailed blueprint for the project team members; individual names are assigned to each work task, and due dates or "milestones" are indicated and

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[2] The instructor has contacted potential clients and confirmed a commitment for a project that requires one or more written deliverables. Each client has visited our class (in this case, the previous quarter, March 2006) to give a short, 10-15 minute "pitch" for his/her organization and its needs.

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then appear on the Gantt Chart. The classic Gantt Chart (a type of bar chart created early in the 20^{th} century by Henry Gantt, a time-and-motion efficiency expert) provides a visual reminder that the team or the instructor can refer to when checking to see if the project is "on schedule."

Approximately a week or ten days after the workplan was written, individual team members sent an **e-mail status report** to the instructor. The chance to hear from each team member about the service learning project's progress was very helpful. For example, sometimes the project's team leader may have a different assessment than the rest of the team members. Or one team member will express problems or insecurities to me that haven't surfaced to the team's attention. Such discrepancy is worth exploring—ideally, early warnings allow problems to be resolved before they become major obstacles.

Some of the service learning project deliverables required a **style sheet** when individual authors were creating parts of a whole product. For example, students created a style sheet to determine font size and color of headings and text; slide background color and logo usage; and transitions/ animations for the PowerPoint slides to be used by a client at freshman orientation sessions. Another project team created a grant proposal portfolio, with a brochure, letter of inquiry, organization history, etc. This required a style guide for acronym spelling, logo usage, and font styles, sizes, and colors.

The **transmittal letter** marked a formal closure to the project; it included a list of project deliverables that accompanied the letter. It expressed thanks to the client and most also included recommendations for the client's organization and future projects. Like the engagement letter, this document was written by one member of the team (typically the team leader) on team letterhead and then was approved by the team and signed by each team member.

The conclusion of the project required each member of the project team to complete a **performance evaluation** form that assessed all team members' work (including a self-assessment). The form was accompanied by a **short memo** to the instructor that included the student's final report on the service-learning project, summarizing "lessons learned" and recommendations for future projects. Ideally, the client provided written feedback (sometimes only oral comments) too. Of course, this final memo from the students is the critical opportunity for reflection that connects service and learning: "reflection is the glue that holds service and learning together to provide [optimal] educative experiences" (quoted in Cooper, 1998, p. 55). While reflection is not a project management tool, it does contribute to the project's successful learning outcome.

Summary: Transparency, Accountability, Good Will—and Good Reflection

Project management documents can effectively shape a project's development and final deliverables. By analyzing and breaking down a large project into smaller sub-project activities, with specific students responsible for these activities to be completed on specific dates, the project workplan provides tools for students to plan and to achieve.

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By encouraging communication through the letter of engagement, the workplan, and the status reports, these project documents *create an expectation of both transparency and accountability.* The project is not a "black box" with the students expected to emerge, weeks later, with a finished product for a final grade. Rather, periodic project documents are written to an audience (instructor and client) to invite questions and feedback. As the instructor, I appreciated getting concise and clear visibility into various student projects. These documents helped me to do a better job facilitating the service learning. The documents invite feedback through comments and grades—intervention follows if needed (one of my four teams needed a team meeting with me, to strategize for different methods to work with a client who wasn't giving much feedback and who had missed two meetings with the team).

The status reports and final personnel and project evaluations encourage accountability for one's actions. All students know from the first day of class that there will be a "judgment day" for team performance. The instructor's facilitation of the service learning project does not equate simply to the "instrumentalism" that J. Blake Scott warns against (see his article, pp. 289-306, in the Special Topics: Civic Engagement and Technical Communication, *Technical Communication Quarterly* Summer 2004). Rather, the status reports and final memo of assessment encourage students to question their learning experience and to make recommendations both to the teacher and to the client.

I believe that because the instructor has taken the time to introduce students to "real world" project management tools— and because these documents are meant to encourage planning, time management, fair work distribution, and performance accountability as well as critical reflection—students perform to the best of their capabilities. Clients also are reassured about the professionalism of the students and their commitment to completing the project on time. In short, the documents contribute to the mutual trust that is so important in a project's success.

And from this good will, good results seem to follow: after this year's Spring Quarter service learning project, all four of the clients asked if they could again work with a student team on another service-learning project. And, we now have a waiting list as our reputation grows. I consider the written project management documents the foundation of that good reputation.

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*For a useful overview to project management, see Wikipedia's "Project Management" (http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Project_management&oldid=66678634) . Accessed July 30 and July 31, 2006.