INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS
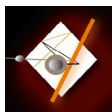
Engaging professional communication students in a global future

Molly K. Johnson

Eastern Washington University

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Educators have consistently identified service learning as an effective means of engaging professional communication students in the communities where they live and work. Sapp and Crabtree (2002) argue that, by integrating problem solving, critical thinking, and reflection into course work, service learning helps students integrate "theory and practice, the academy and the community, and inquiry and social action" (p. 412). When students write for or with community partners in service-learning projects, the process develops "students' professional, intellectual, and civic engagement" (Turnley, 2007, p. 104). With

students entering a global economy, however, they also need to become practitioners in and citizens of a wider community, thus the need to integrate international service learning in professional communication curricula.

Ideally, professional communication students would engage with service-learning partners on site, immersed in the community and participating directly in cross-cultural communication and complex problem solving. Although I find numerous *virtual* international service-learning examples in professional communication literature (see literature review of "Virtual service learning: Negotiating boundaries," this issue), my survey of the professional communication literature identifies no current publications about on-site international professional communication projects.

In contrast, literature in technical and scientific disciplines reveals a substantial number of on-site international service-learning projects. In one example, Katterheinrich and Polito (2006) describe a well-drilling project in Kenya—a partnership with student members of Valparaiso University's chapter of Engineers Without Borders. In another example, Riner and Becklenberg (2001) describe an environmental health care collaboration between a Nicaraguan Sister City Organization and a US delegation of Indiana University nursing and optometry students and professional and lay health workers. Although neither of the projects includes students from the humanities, these campus collaborations with international humanitarian organizations suggest possible on-site partnerships for professional communication students, whose design and writing skills would extend an existing

project's capacity and enhance its reach, influence, and levels of community engagement.

Some engineering projects, however, do include non-engineering students, further demonstrating potential roles for professional communication students and their rhetorical, writing, design, and problem-solving skills. In one such partnership, Valparaiso University engineering professor Polito (2005) describes an irrigation project in Kenya designed by the university's student chapter of Engineers Without Borders. In this project, Polito notes that the non-engineering—humanities—students brought unique problem-solving skills, increased the entire group's awareness of the social impact of the irrigation project, and "instigated several very valuable discussions among the group about the nature and impact of the work being done" (p. 10). Polito's (2005) experience suggests that professional writing students could further enhance the project by developing maintenance and training materials—appropriately adapted to the languages, literacies, and resources of the community partners—and by creating written and digital reports about these international projects for future funding or marketing purposes.

In another example, Florman, Just, Naka, Peterson, and Seaba (2009) provide a model of an interdisciplinary team of Xicotepec residents—east-central Mexico—, University of Iowa students—engineering, pharmacy, and humanities—, and local Rotary International members, who collaborated to identify and address community needs, including potable water, classroom space, and healthcare. Two groups of students, the Water Team and Pharmacy Team, prepared in advance

to complete specific projects that had been pre-determined by Rotary members in Iowa and community leaders in Mexico (pp. 77–79). The third group, the Write Team—journalism, women's studies, management, and psychology students—, was not linked in advance to a specific community project, but rather developed its own service-learning projects on site by "forging partnerships with community partners" (p. 81). The Write Team completed written products that are fundamental elements of cross-functional professional communication service-learning projects: a proposal for a retirement home, posters and brochures for a women's health clinic, and articles for a regional newspaper (p. 80).

Each of these projects demonstrates how a small professional communication program could collaborate with larger campus and community entities to accomplish meaningful and productive international partnerships. Beyond reminding us about campus and community organizations already engaged internationally, these examples further identify how professional communication students are especially well-suited to actively integrate writing into an engineering task or health service.

Professional communication students improve service learning by extending a program's capacity with complementary resources. Professional communication students enhance global partnerships through their diverse problem-solving skills and their ability to work with subject matter experts in cross-functional teams, but also by moving the group's focus beyond the task itself—well drilling, health screenings—to increase participants' political, social, and cultural sensitivity.

At stake is the opportunity to engage professional communication students in critical community issues, allowing them to see first-hand the full impact of their service and, paraphrasing Katterheinrich and Polito (2006), to see professional communication as more than just a job, but also as a means of serving a global future. ■

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About the Author

Molly K. Johnson, PhD, has over 15 years of experience in rhetoric and professional communication and teaches a range of courses, including grant writing, editing, and information design. Her research includes service learning and institutional discourse.

Email. mjohnson@ewu.edu

Contact.
Department of English
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, WA 99004
USA