Chapter 6

Hybridizing F2F and Virtual Collaboration Between a Government Agency and Service-Learning Technical Writing Students

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ABSTRACT

This case study reviews a hybrid face-to-face (F2F) and virtual collaboration between the State of Hawaii’s Division of Forestry and Wildlife and a team of university technical writing students to indicate specific features of the hybridity as it shaped the collaboration. In a course focused on organizational authorship, students were tasked with learning about the organization’s workplace culture to successfully represent its ethos in a report on the history of forestry in Hawai‘i. Moments and modes of collaboration are discussed chronologically as they enabled successful report writing, featuring key components: clearly stipulating terms of collaboration through service-learning, assessing fit between the course and the organization, emphasizing the need for onsite visits by students to ascertain the workplace culture, conducting swift follow-up on challenges in meshing the virtual with the face-to-face, and leveraging each mode of collaboration synergistically rather than discretely.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional gulfs between the campus and the community produce writing scenarios that fail to take advantage of the kinds of knowledge produced in each, yet as Spinuzzi has observed in his discussion of “distributed work” (2007), alliances bridging the two are certain to emerge increasingly. These alliances, often enabled through service-learning, can benefit from collaboration that merges face-to-face (F2F) interaction with the virtual possibilities...
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afforded by Web 2.0 technology, as illustrated by this case study set in Hawai‘i. In a state comprising seven islands, virtual collaboration is indispensable to composing state government reports. For technical writing students partnering with a government agency and seeking to adequately reflect that agency’s organizational culture and ethos, face-to-face interaction between students and organizational workers is key. This case study traces the collaboration between my technical writing students partnered through service-learning with the Department of Land and Natural Resources/Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW) in Hawai‘i to identify key modes and moments of interaction that met the goals of both the Division and the course. After a brief depiction of the context of the project, a timeline of events reveals important interconnections between virtual and F2F collaboration, noting both breakthroughs and challenges afforded by technology. The study concludes with summary comments on the educational impact of the project, the community impact of the project, and the value of the project in forming community partnerships.

CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

The format for this technical writing course emphasized teaching technical authorship (Henry, 1995), with a goal of helping students “internalize the complexities of working in real contexts” (Clark, 2004, 320). On a Tuesday/Thursday schedule in a 16-week semester, this format devoted the first half of the semester to teaching technical writing fundamentals such as audience, purpose, and genre, with a strong emphasis on organizational authorship as it requires technical writers to represent an organization’s ethos adequately and ethically. In the second half of the semester, I placed students in teams of two or three into organizational contexts to complete collaborative technical writing projects, so that they could enact the principles learned during the first half of the semester in a rhetorical context that enabled them to perceive the reciprocal nature of workplace culture and document production (Kleiman, 1993). I articulated the course with the campus service-learning office, which solicited community partners at mid-semester. Once partners were identified around the seventh week, students and I collaborated with the organization’s point of contact to propose an appropriate writing project. Projects embraced a wide range of genres, yet the central course premises of writing “for,” “with” (Deans, 2000) or “as” (Bowdon & Scott, 2003) the community organization figured alongside that of learning the organization’s culture to represent its ethos, or character. Academic writing most often positions students as singular authors, leaving them ill-prepared for the mostly collaborative writing of the workplace (Ede & Lunsford, 1990; Rainey, Turner, & Dayton, 2005), so learning outcomes for this course included collaborating effectively as a team and with the organization to produce technical documents that achieved clarity, cohesion, and readability, while also meeting the goals for the document as established by the organization.

TIMELINE OF MOMENTS AND MODES OF COLLABORATION

Because the hybrid collaboration produced a synergy that emerged over time, key elements of this synergy are best located along a timeline, as follows:

Step 1: Listserv Solicitation

At week 6, I solicited collaborators from the community via a Web 1.0 tool—the campus service-learning listserv. This solicitation briefly explained the course format, designated the availability period of weeks 8-16, and listed the specific kinds of writing that might work in a collaborative venture. (Experience had shown that this last information was an important ingredient in first
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