Classroom Comes to Life: Technical Communication Applied in the Community

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Abstract

Technical writing is in high demand, but for college students it is difficult to find opportunities to develop the skill. Through their technical writing class, Jasmine Amerin, Angelique Long, Rhiannon Minster and their classmates were able to work with Re.Use.Full as a service learning project. Technical writing and communication can include technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations, using technology, such as web pages, help files, or social media sites, or instructions about how to do something. Re.Use.Full is a local organization that connects nonprofits, registered 501(c)(3) organizations, in need of items with donors who have items to donate, and the organization's website was developed by students in the technical writing class. Deliverables included editing pages for the website, writing instructions for registration, and creating blog posts. Many graduates find careers in nonprofits, and partnering with Re.Use.Full gave students the chance to expand their portfolio and get real-world experience. This poster takes an in-depth look at how the partnership functioned and how it benefited both Re.Use.Full and the students.

Introduction

Re.Use.Full, one of Code for KC's most recent environmentally-friendly initiatives, aims to reduce waste and promote recycling by connecting donors to organizations that have a use for their reusable items. As of January 2019, Re.Use.Full was still being conceptualized, which made it the perfect opportunity for a community-focused service learning project, particularly for an asynchronous online class, where face-to-face contact would be limited to scheduled Zoom meetings and coffee meetups.

Code for America's local brigades work on volunteer-proposed projects where technical writers can sharpen their skills as project managers, UX designers, usability testers, content writers, coders, and social media marketers. UMKC students engaged in a partnership with Code for KC that was focused on an iterative, agile development process, cross-cultural and intercultural communication practices, and mutually beneficial final deliverables.

Results and Benefits

Unlike more conventional internships or collegiate courses that incorporate service learning, local community partnerships offer a sustained benefit for participating students and universities as well as the community partner. The same kind of benefits are available for practitioners seeking meaningful professional development opportunities, and Code for America provides a valuable learning space to work with cross-functional professionals such as community organizers, government officials, and coders.

The benefits of implementing non-profit partnerships go far beyond curriculum design and professional development. These partnerships are unique in their ability to increase the diversity of the technical communication field. Every experience and background is valuable, and community-minded partnerships present a unique opportunity to increase diversity in the technical communication field.

Not only does Code for America provide a space for purposeful professional development, but it also offers an opportunity for technical writers in every city with a brigade chapter to collaborate with community organizers and local governments in the resolution of technical problems and, perhaps most importantly, to build community.
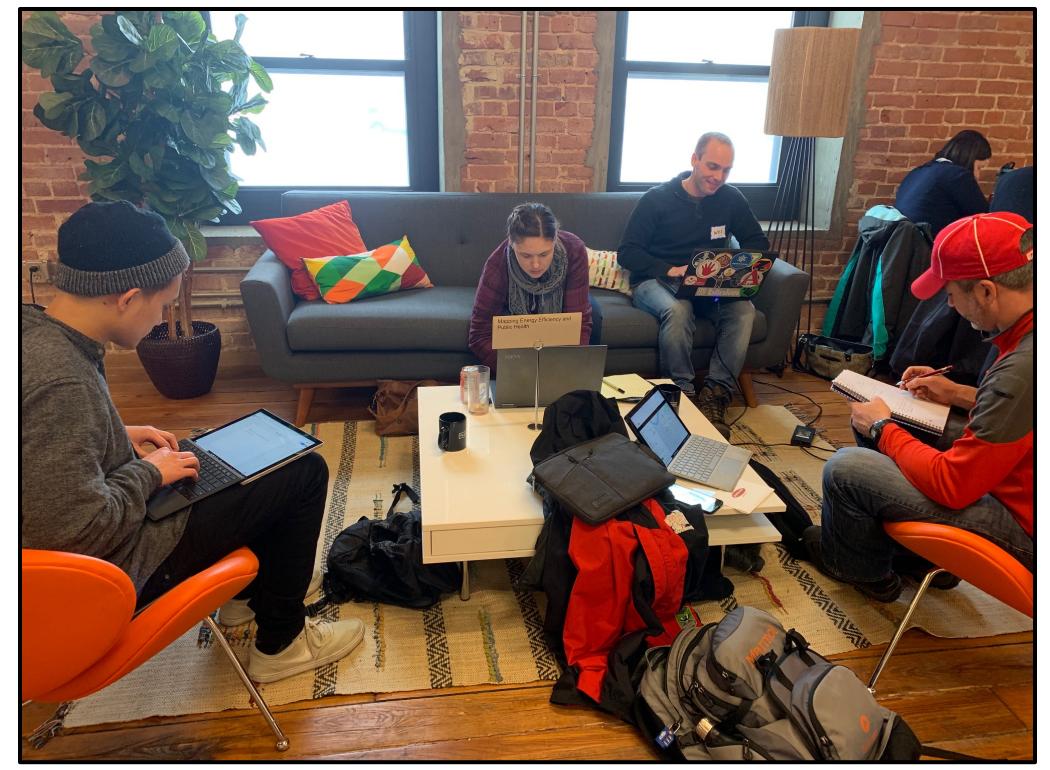
Methods and Materials

Through Zoom meetings and Canvas Discussion Boards, the deliverables designed for Re.Use.Full functioned beyond a gradebook or a seminar.

Students completed a set of deliverables that could be implemented in their senior portfolios and resumes. For our class, those included:

- ❖ Web 1.0 content
- ❖ Instruction sets for individual donors and nonprofit organizations
- ❖ Regulatory content, including terms and conditions and Web 2.0 content
- ❖ Community development plan

Conclusions

As demonstrated by our brief case study, partnerships with non-profit organizations pose a particularly gratifying opportunity for students and professionals alike to explore concepts of technical communication and to hone relevant skills.

The explorative and varied work of a partnership with a Code for America brigade chapter supplies technical communicators seeking professional development with the appropriate introduction to several different aspects of community outreach and web content development. Volunteering with a brigade can help technical writers explore and practice new skills, learn new genres, and build community.

Re.Use.Full
Give stuff. Get stuff.

Contact

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