

Individual Mini-Grant Proposal

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Project Title: Preparing for CBL and Digital Emphases

While I focus my attention on a new course (ENG 344) called “Writing for Nonprofits” in particular, this mini-grant provides support for me in two key areas, both of which will likely undergird most of my teaching for the next decade:

- **Community-based Learning:** This is relevant as I revise my current FTS for multilingual students, prepare my new ENG 344 class, and also for possible Writing Center work.
- **Digital Writing:** Digital texts will be fundamental for all WRIT1 and WRITD courses that I will offer in the future, including ENG 212, ENG 247, ENG 256, and ENG 399.

This grant will support my research and professional development needs as I plan to teach courses for the ENG department following my 2014-15 sabbatical. In particular, I am planning a new Special Topics (ENG 344) course, which will in turn become part of a newly proposed “Topics in Writing” category (ENG 301) in the near future. This ENG 301 is a key part of our curricular revision in progress, and new courses will be proposed to the curriculum committee beginning in spring 2015. The English department typically pilots courses twice as Special Topics before proposing them formally to the Curriculum committee; thus I will teach and assess ENG 344 twice before proposing the ENG 301 version.

Pedagogical Ideas/ Problems

My ENG 344 “Writing and Nonprofits” combines a community-based learning opportunity with instruction in multiple forms of writing, especially digital ones. The course will pair English majors (300 level) with local nonprofit agencies, allowing students to write with and for those community partners. In turn, we’ll use our traditional classroom time to analyze such forms rhetorically and consider the role that writing plays in nonprofit work.

As my department looks to the future, we face the impending retirements of 50% of our faculty members and changing expectations regarding digital literacy practices and texts. My colleagues and I know that we must stretch in order to meet students’ needs. We must find ways to develop some expertise in digital writing within our department. Our students need to be able to practice writing in digital environments, producing wikis, blogs, web pages, online magazines, and other forms. We cannot assume that we will be able to search for a new tenure-track faculty member with this expertise. Moreover, as a rhetoric and composition specialist, I feel compelled to develop such expertise myself.

We know that new media matter to our graduates because we've done the research. In fall of 2013, as part of our annual assessment process, the English department examined employment information about our majors dating back ten years. In looking at that spreadsheet, we found that the majority of our graduates went on to work in contexts like these: teaching (abroad and domestically); non-profit organizations; the legal field; and corporate or retail related positions. They did not necessarily go on to graduate school, but rather were working in local communities doing a wide variety of tasks, typically dependent upon their written and oral communication skills. Our most recent graduates report daily tasks like these: preparing social media; blogging and creating other forms of digital journalism; maintaining web sites; serving as liaisons between technical divisions or IT and consumers. Our graduates often translate, reflect upon, and communicate information, relying upon digital forms in order to do it. Looking at our curriculum, we realized we aren't necessarily preparing students well for this work.

But just learning about digital forms isn't enough to help our students prepare for the future. Students need to learn to use those forms within actual rhetorical contexts, particularly contexts that supports our social justice mission and prepare students for the civic engagement that Gustavus grads often undertake. The context for this new course, then, is the world of local nonprofit organizations. I, like most of my ENG colleagues, advise students to seek internships. I urge them to grab opportunities that will place them within organizations that do good things in the world, and to seek out opportunities where they can use their writing skills. But I cannot guarantee that they will find such internships. For some students, particularly those who face financial challenges, internships are actually a luxury, taking time away from coursework that could enable them to finish on time or even early, or competing with other full-time (paying) job opportunities during the summers. Increasingly, this group of students includes first generation college-goers; many are students of color. Moreover, while we may occasionally offer courses that enable students to make connections with community members or organizations beyond Gustavus, the ENG department has yet to make such a course a part of its regular offerings. "Writing and Nonprofits" would offer an annual opportunity for any interested ENG major (and perhaps others)—regardless of financial situation or transportation needs-- to connect with an organization and practice the digital forms of writing that are so vital to most workplaces today.

Course Focus and Mini-Grant Project

Below is the course description that I have shared with ENG colleagues and others, including Jeffrey Rathlef and Bob Weisenfeld:

ENG 344: Special Topics Writing for Nonprofit Organizations

This community-based learning (CBL) section of ENG 344 invites students to consider the ways that non-profit organizations communicate broadly with possible

donors, volunteers, and recipients of services. Much of this communication happens digitally, and these digital texts help the organizations construct professional identities for themselves. Rhetorically, then, nonprofits offer us a site rich with analytical possibility, as their texts reach multi-layered audiences within—and sometimes far beyond--their communities. The course is a hybrid, operating in fairly traditional ways as a seminar in rhetorical analysis, while ultimately becoming a site for community-based learning projects for teams of student writers who collaborate with nonprofit organizations. Students first learn rhetorical terminology and study the ways that notable non-profit organizations use traditional and digital texts to communicate their assumptions, values, and needs to their audiences. From that critical study, the course evolves into a digital writing workshop as small groups of students are paired with actual non-profit organizations in rural Minnesota in order to help those organizations develop digital texts (web pages, digital narratives, and social media). Ultimately, students will learn not only to analyze but also create and evaluate digital texts in this context.

Here are some ways that the course meets departmental and institutional goals:

1. This course offers students in the ENG department who may not have the means to accept an internship an opportunity to work directly with a nonprofit organization, learning to produce digital texts (web pages, podcasts, social media) that share the non-profit's message. This helps us serve our population of first-generation college goers in particular, as many have been unable to take on internships because they do not have cars, cannot take any time away from their regular course work, and/ or have family and work obligations outside of school.
2. This course offers students the opportunity to learn to produce and analyze digital texts, a clear goal for our future and a way in which we will better prepare English majors for the kinds of tasks they'll face in the workplace.
3. The class will ultimately add to our current offerings in writing courses, providing our first ever 300 level seminar in writing, and it fits well with our interdisciplinary framework and reiterates the usefulness of English Studies for those who want to make a difference in the world.
4. As a service learning or CBL opportunity, we bring to agencies that couldn't otherwise afford consultants a team of well-informed student writers to create online content and/ or assist with a variety of writing tasks (to be defined in negotiation with community partners during the grant year).

The mini-grant will focus on my professional development in the following areas:

1. *Professional development in area of digital pedagogies and teaching with technology*

This grant provides funds for conference travel, helping me develop the necessary competencies in working with digital texts. This will be accomplished by attending two "unconferences" by THAT (The Humanities and

Technology)camp. THATcamps are held multiple times annually in different cities; the dates for next year are not yet available. THATcamp was recommended to me by Kyle Chambers, our current Kendall Center Faculty Associate for Technology, and by Sean Cobb, who is next in line for that position. Additional conference opportunities may also be pursued, including a trip to the annual CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication) at Tampa and/ or the Computers in Composition and Literature conference. Note also that the AWP (Associated Writing Programs) annual conference is in Mineapolis this fall.

2. Professional development in area of community-based learning

This grant supports attendance/ participation in at least one regional or national conference focused on community-based learning, such as the annual “Midwest Engagement Summit.” Jeffrey Rathlef is helping me create a list of possible meetings and conferences to attend next year. I have also subscribed to the MN Campus Compact’s “News To Use” electronic newsletter to seek out local workshops and conferences.

3. Funds to support one-on-one work with community partners

I will use the grant to help me pay for meals, mileage, or other expenses related to meetings with possible community partners. Rathlef will facilitate and host a first meeting with Nancy Zallek of the Mankato Area Foundation, for instance. In turn, Nancy will help me identify a list of possible community partners. I will use funds to help facilitate individual meetings with those partners throughout AY 2014-15 to negotiate details of the CBL component for my course.

4. Funds to purchase books, software, or other materials

This is a completely new area for me to research and teach, and thus I anticipate building my library quite a bit. I also hope to share those resources with others who have expressed similar interests in digital literacy work.

Plan of Work

There is much work to be done before I can write a syllabus for such a course; this is why I propose to spend much of my sabbatical year (2014-15) laying the groundwork for the course, which will be taught in spring of 2016. Here are my plans for the grant period:

1. Meet several times with Nancy Zallek in order to discuss and foster relationships with community partner sites for 15-20 students annually.
2. Meet individually with each contact named above to negotiate organization’s goals and synthesize those goals with student learning outcomes for the course. This means that assessment criteria will be developed organically; I cannot impose them on the community partner.

3. Attend at least one CBL regional meeting or conference. Learn as much as possible about existing models for such courses at small colleges.
4. After discussing possible tasks and activities with community partners, identify appropriate conference or meeting focused on digital literacy and digital pedagogies. Attend 1-2 of these conferences and begin to plan digital writing assignments and rubrics.
5. Review and select possible textbooks and materials for the course; purchase review copies as needed.
6. Meet regularly with Jeffrey Rathlef to monitor and adjust plans for the course.

Outcomes and Assessment

Because I am planning CBL components, outcomes and assessments for student participation in the service-learning aspects of the course must arise organically from conversation with community partners. I cannot “impose” my own goals and outcomes on those partners. For instance, I may want my students to actually edit web pages for the partners. But the partners may not be comfortable with such activity, and thus I’d have to see what they’d be willing to ask my students to do before I can determine how well my students have done it.

That said, I have reviewed several resources that provide rubrics for assessing service learning, and I can say this:

1. I will create a rubric, in consultation with community partners, that assesses students’ participation in the organization and the usefulness of their work;
2. I will assess students’ contributions to the organizations that they serve, using feedback from the community partners as well as my own observations;
3. I will ask students to keep a portfolio of texts, including a digital journal or blog, and write larger synthesizing reflections at three points within the semester;
4. I will utilize an instrument such as the Civic Engagement VALUE rubric developed by the AACU, to assess their contributions and work with the community partners; I might also adapt a “field experience” rubric from a program like EDU or NUR to help me assess the quality of students’ engagement with community partners.
5. Equally important is to learn how (if at all) students’ attitudes toward the community based learning components changed throughout the course. I might use existing models of pre-test/ post-test assessment to work on that. I plan to consult with colleagues, including Kristian Braekkan and Kathy Lund Dean, as I plan ways to assess the CBL component.

In terms of developing rhetorical and digital literacy skills, here are is an early draft of some student learning outcomes:

- Students will describe and analyze elements of the rhetorical situation, focusing especially on formulations of audience as a theoretical construct;
- Students will describe and analyze digital texts created by national nonprofit organizations;
- Students will compare and contrast digital texts created by national and local nonprofit organizations and account for distinctions among them;
- Students will develop criteria to assess rhetorical success in digital environments;
- Students will identify and analyze the rhetorical mechanisms utilized most frequently by non-profits;
- Students will learn to use current social media and digital platforms in order to create and maintain relationships with community members;
- Students will practice collaboration, producing texts in small groups and evaluating those texts from a rhetorical perspective;
- Students will create a digital portfolio of texts created for the community partner organization.

Anticipated project completion date: May 1, 2015

At that point, I may propose a Curriculum Revitalization Grant, as it will be important to have resources to teach and assess the course during the next academic year. But the professional development stage should end by May 1 of 2015.

Budget Request: \$1500

While I have attached the excel spreadsheet, I don't think it communicates the budget quite this clearly:

1. Books and Materials: \$200 to purchase books related to digital literacies and CBL.
2. Travel to THATCamp "Unconference" in Nashville, TN October, 2014: \$900

(Or travel to THATcamp in Dearborn later in the year; similar cost?)

\$400 airfare round trip
 \$50 registration (estimate)
 \$300 hotel room (up to 4 nights)
 \$100 food allowance
 \$50 airport parking

3. Travel to CCCC in Tampa, FL (budget permitting) or to AWP in Minneapolis, MN (significantly cheaper): \$1,015.00

\$400 airfare round trip
\$115 registration (more for AWP, but no airfare...)
\$300 hotel (up to 3 nights)
\$150 food allowance
\$50 airport parking

4. Mileage to meetings with community partners and/ or local or regional CBL or digital conferences:

Up to 200 miles x 56.5 cents= \$113.00

MAX TOTAL EXCEEDS \$1500.00, thus I'm asking for **\$1500.00**

I'm also assuming that this money can be moved around (if, for instance, THATcamp is much less expensive than the other conference options, I'll choose to do two of those. Or, if there aren't \$200 worth of necessary books to purchase, I'll move that money to the travel side of the budget. Because this is an entirely new area of teaching for me, I'm not really sure what the resources are, and that's part of the reason that I need next year in order to learn about them.