

Using eService-Learning to Practice Technical Writing Skills for Emerging Nonprofit Professionals

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Abstract

Undergraduate students entering the nonprofit sector receive theoretical information on working in nonprofits but may need practical skills. Universities can assist in developing these practical skills through service-learning opportunities. Nonprofit courses and programs are increasingly being offered online and students may lack the opportunity to participate in traditional service-learning classes. Service-learning—linking service to course learning outcomes—as a pedagogy is transforming to meet the needs of these virtual classrooms. One key transformation is the rise of eService-learning, a method that is mediated by technology and is delivered online. This paper discusses ways that eService-learning was effectively utilized in an online nonprofit course by students to practice technical writing skills. It provides an example of a project in which students developed practical skills and created a professional product for nonprofits. The paper also discusses challenges and successes with the project with recommendations for use by others.

Keywords: eservice-learning; nonprofit education; technical writing

Nonprofit professionals need academic knowledge and practical skills to be successful in the workplace. Educators can use service-learning (SL) projects to provide knowledge and skills to nonprofit students. SL is a pedagogical tool that aims to link theory with practice. It is a form of experiential education that includes other activities such as internships, practicums, cooperative learning, and student teaching, providing “a bridge between learning in the classroom and learning on the job” (Strait & Sauer, 2004, p. 62). SL courses have been shown to benefit all participants including students, educators, community partners, and institutions of higher education. While there are challenges to implementing SL courses, primarily the increased time commitment from all participants, studies have shown that the benefits greatly outweigh the costs (Lebovits & Bharath, 2019).

The current trend in higher education is offering online programs and courses in addition to or instead of in the classroom (Bennett & Green, 2001; Meyer, 2014). Online education has been shown to expand access to higher education, allow for increased enrollment of students, cater to nontraditional students, and catalyze institutional transformation (Volery & Lord, 2000), as well as allow for increased revenues for institutions through tuition. With this delivery method, online academic programs can offer students the opportunity to attend classes on their own time preferences, despite geographic locations and work and family obligations (Bossaller, 2016). However, students who take online courses may not receive the same benefits as students who take courses in person, such as SL opportunities, and may be less connected to the materials presented in class (Bossaller, 2016; Maddrell, 2014a; Strait & Sauer, 2004). Educators can use eService-learning (eSL) courses that are provided entirely online (extreme eSL) or as a hybrid eSL course with online and in-person components, to engage online students more directly with course content and provide similar benefits as SL courses. eSL occurs when one or both components of a course (i.e., the instructional component [theory] or the service component [practice]) are conducted online (Waldner, Widener, & McGorry, 2012). Online courses facilitate eSL by freeing SL from geographic constraints and equipping online learning with a tool to promote engagement (Waldner et al., 2012). Educators can use eSL projects in online nonprofit courses to develop students’ skills while addressing the needs of nonprofits.

One of the most direct links of eSL to nonprofit courses is the practice of technical writing skills. In the nonprofit sector, professionals must be able to write technically and produce items such as brochures, annual reports, employee and volunteer manuals, memos, program evaluations, and strategic reports. Indeed, there are a multitude of technical writing products expected of nonprofit professionals. However, while providing theoretical knowledge for students, nonprofit academic programs also work with students on developing these skills (Stone, 2000). Some courses allow students to practice their technical writing skills with hypothetical situations such as case studies and made-up scenarios. These experiences, however, do not provide the same experience and complexity as real-life practice (McEachern, 2001). Educators can use eSL in online nonprofit courses to provide emerging nonprofit professionals with opportunities to practice technical writing skills, while addressing the real-life needs of nonprofits. These projects can also build the technical capacity of the organization and help community organizations fulfill their missions (Carpenter, 2011).

Nonprofits often lack the time or resources to develop structural components for their organizations, such as human resource materials (e.g., employee handbooks or volunteer manuals). Nonprofits address the most pressing needs of their organizations first and often sweep necessary nonprofit infrastructure items under the rug until there is time or resources for less pressing matters. However, these projects often stay under the rug. Nonprofits can utilize students through SL projects to address these needs (Helms, Rutti, Hervani, LaBonte, & Sarkarat, 2015). Nonprofit students, under the guidance of faculty educators, can use SL courses to assist organizations and help strengthen the capacity of nonprofits.

SL has become an established and well-researched pedagogy (Britt, 2012; Mennen, 2006). However, eSL is a more recent educational tool that has gained more research focus. This paper hopes to add to that research in showing a practical application of an eSL project in online nonprofit courses that allows emerging nonprofit professionals to practice technical writing skills and meets the needs of partnering nonprofit organizations. This is an example of an extreme eSL course in which instruction and service projects occur completely online (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2010). This project, however, can be completed as a traditional SL or hybrid eSL project. In two separate classes, student groups worked with local nonprofits to develop human resource materials including board member manuals and orientations, volunteer manuals and orientations, and volunteer recruitment and evaluation plans. This study provides valuable insights into the feasibility of online engagement including best practices, workload implications, challenges and successes, and connecting nonprofit needs with student learning outcomes. The remainder of the paper provides a discussion of SL and eSL, the benefits and challenges of SL/eSL projects, and a description of the project with recommendations for other instructors to implement this project.

Literature Review

Service-Learning and eService-Learning

Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defined SL as “credit-bearing educational experience” in which students “gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 222). SL is a pedagogical tool that allows students to comprehend course matter better by integrating academic materials (theory) with practical application (Kapucu & Knox, 2011; Mennen, 2006; Waldner et al., 2012). Overall, SL allows for the acquisition of knowledge by engaging students in community service and ongoing reflections that lead to the analysis of issues, the application of skills, and the enriching of communities (Britt, 2012; Gallagher & McGorry, 2015).

Traditional SL projects are completed in face-to-face settings where students visit and work with local community partners and community members (Nielsen, 2016; Waldner et al., 2010). These service projects engage students with the community by addressing identified needs of community organizations. However, as higher education classes and programs increasingly move to online formats, it becomes necessary to find ways to engage distance learners similarly to students in traditional classroom settings (i.e., work-based experiences and experiential learning; Purcell, 2008; Strait & Sauer, 2004). Online courses expand community to beyond a geographic location

(Waldner et al., 2012), even internationally (Harris, 2017), and therefore increase the challenges in engaging these distance students. Primarily, all students cannot be at the same physical location at the same time, as done in traditional SL courses. However, as educators have adapted their courses to online versions, so too can they adapt SL projects to be conducted online (Purcell, 2008). Online learning can be a facilitator to SL efforts with eSL “a key to the future of service-learning” (Waldner et al., 2012, p. 123), promoting community engagement to and interaction with distance learners.

Best Practices and Design Principles

Courses with an SL or eSL component should follow some common best practices and design principles to ensure the success of the project and the class overall. By following the three *Rs* of SL courses—reality, reciprocity, and reflection (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005)—educators can ensure the class structure and project design is appropriate for SL.

Reality ensures a clear connection between the learning objectives and the service project, as well as appropriate time commitments, clear goals and impacts, participant commitment and buy-in, and proper design and project management (Imperial, Perry, & Katula, 2007; Maddrell, 2014b). Projects should not be overly time consuming for participants. Participants should also know their roles and responsibilities and be committed to the project’s successful completion. Strategies for realistic projects include formalized project management protocols to detail expectations, roles, and responsibilities (Maddrell, 2014b), agreed upon definition of successes, and processes for clear and constant communication. Contracts can be used as a tool to increase role clarity and understanding of responsibilities, outcomes, and outputs (Bennett & Green, 2001), while lesson plans can link learning outcomes to service activities (Hydorn, 2007). Finally, participants in eSL courses may need additional training in technology and SL best practices (Waldner et al., 2012). This training needs to be incorporated in the realistic project design. Taken together, these components create realistic projects that are feasible and connect learning outcomes to the service project.

Reciprocity empowers all participants to assist in the structuring and implementation of the project (Hilosky, Moore, & Reynolds, 1999). Community partners and educators can develop a coeducational relationship by working together to design projects and share course objectives (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Students can also be empowered to assist in the design and implementation of projects, which increases their buy-in to the project and their overall leadership development. Feedback loops and constant communication can facilitate these partnerships (Imperial et al., 2007), thus increasing outcomes for all participants.

Reflection emphasizes the construction of knowledge (Fisher, Sharp, & Bradley, 2017) where students connect the service project to the course learning outcomes by emotionally and intellectually engaging in the service experience (Dubinsky, 2006). Reflective exercises such as journals, group discussions, and short-answer responses should be completed at different points throughout the service experience. Reflection connects the service to the learning but can be intimidating to do correctly and is often done at a basic level, without true reflection (Barnes & Caprino, 2016). Educators interested in SL need to ensure that reflections allow for critical engagement in students. Educators who carefully plan, develop, and implement SL courses with these types of

considerations should decrease some of the challenges associated with the implementation of SL or eSL (Lebovits & Bharath, 2019).

Benefits of SL

SL or eSL projects are beneficial to students, educators, community partners, and institutions, with the potential for reciprocal learning between participants (Furco, 1996). This section details the benefits for each stakeholder.

Student benefits. Students derive the most benefits from SL courses, with research demonstrating a number of positive student outcomes (Bennett & Green, 2001; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Levesque-Bristol & Richards, 2005). Benefits include academic development (mastery of discipline material, problem solving, critical thinking and reflection, linking theory to practice and improved student–teacher and peer relationships), personal development (personal efficacy, social responsibility, moral development, fewer behavioral problems, leadership, self-confidence, self-esteem, communication skills, social interaction skills, self-awareness, political awareness, identity reaffirmation, feeling pleased with themselves, promotion of intercultural communication, and personal transformation), social development (reducing stereotypes, facilitating racial and cultural understanding, interacting with and accepting diverse cultures, societal awareness, social justice attitudes, developing an other-oriented ethic, and promoting collaboration), career development (confidence, networking, professional skills, increased awareness of career choices, résumé building, opportunity to practice newly learned skills, and real-world experience), and community involvement (increased volunteerism, community involvement after graduation, civic-mindedness, and civic engagement; Bennett & Green, 2001; Britt, 2012; Bryer, 2011; Eyler et al., 2001; Furco, 1996; Geller, Zuckerman, & Seidel, 2016; Harris, 2017; Helms et al., 2015; Jacoby, 1999; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Lebovits & Bharath, 2019; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002; Mottner, 2010; Waldner, Roberts, Widener, & Sullivan, 2011). Moreover, SL courses can motivate lasting learning with its linking of theory to practical experience (Kapucu & Knox, 2011; Maddrell, 2014b). Specific to public administration and nonprofit courses, SL has been shown to improve democratic citizenship, increase civic competence and engagement, increase motivation and intention to volunteer, and increase political knowledge and awareness (Kapucu & Knox, 2011; Mottner, 2010) in students. Moreover it challenges “students to give serious consideration to their roles as community members and as citizens in a democratic society” (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001, p. 153). All in all, SL courses have been demonstrated to help with student development.

Educator benefits. Educators who use SL can benefit in and out of the classroom. Educators are meeting service requirements for tenure-track positions, developing their skills in teaching, and able to form connections to community organizations and their institutions as well as develop their own social networks. Class participation, a consistent struggle for educators, is improved (Helms et al., 2015), and there is increased relationship building between students and educators. As representatives of their educational institutions, educators can promote a more positive perception of the institution in the community by improved town–gown relationships, additional opportunities for experiential learning for students (Bennett & Green, 2001; Jacoby, 1999). Furthermore, educators are placed on the front lines of service delivery and may learn about new approaches before such approaches are written about in research

articles (Bennett & Green, 2001). They can use these experiences to conduct research in new and emerging trends in the sector (Furco, 2001; Jacoby, 1999) or use their own SL experiences as a research platform, providing exposure for themselves and their institution.

Community partner benefits. Community partners primarily benefit with free support, short-term labor, and consultation to work on an identified need or a goal met by the students who are performing meaningful work (Bennett & Green, 2001; Geller et al., 2016; Weigert, 1998). Students and educators bring fresh, new energy and ideas for problem solving as well as academic research resources that can lead to the broadening of the delivery of services to address community needs, making nonprofits more innovative and further advancing their mission (Geller et al., 2016; Jacoby, 1999; Maddrell, 2014b). Broader organization-level benefits include increased awareness of the organization; expanded resource base; and the creation of social networks with students and educators and their networks to potentially cultivate friends, future supporters, and even future potential employees or board members (Bennett & Green, 2001; Geller et al., 2016; Helms et al., 2015; Maddrell, 2014b). Furthermore, nonprofits can use SL experiences to determine the motivations of college-aged professionals and develop volunteer programs to attract a younger generation (Tomkovick, Lester, Flunker, & Wells, 2008). In general, SL benefits community partners at the time of participation and in the long term.

Institutional benefits. Institutions of higher education that support SL initiatives have a positive effect on the overall well-being of the community by practically addressing the needs of the community, state, and even region (Kapucu & Knox, 2011; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). Institutions benefit from the increased enrollment and retention of students (Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010) and increased positive reputation in the community. Furthermore, they become eligible for federal funding and national recognition such as the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification and the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (Maddrell, 2014b). Their support and encouragement are integral to the development and implementation of SL courses for their students.

Benefits of eSL

Similar benefits have been reported for eSL but include the benefits associated with online education, namely, increased enrollment of nontraditional students and increased accessibility to students not in the institution's geographic location (Volery & Lord, 2000). Foremost, eSL caters to the nontraditional student who may have a full-time job and family or other caregiving responsibilities that may prevent them from attending traditional classroom-based classes (Strait & Sauer, 2004; Waldner et al., 2012). This online format can also help connect students of different abilities, who are shy or introverted, or who are from geographically diverse locations, especially rural areas (Waldner et al., 2012). eSL is inclusive to all students in an experiential learning process with real demonstrated benefits. Therefore, while eSL has been shown to have the same benefits as traditional SL projects, it can trump in delivery, as it is more accessible to students.

Challenges

SL and eSL courses are challenging to complete, especially for educators whose workloads increase as they plan and coordinate the project, broker relationships between students and community partners, and teach the coursework (Witesman, 2012; Wodicka, Swartz, & Peaslee, 2012). Instructors need to follow best practices, including finding appropriate nonprofits that can work with distance students regardless of geographic location. Moreover, instructors need to ensure that students are prepared and willing to work on the project to the best of their ability, and address issues where poor student conduct, work ethic, and lack of professionalism and commitment may hamper the successful completion of a project (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Finally, instructors may face institutional barriers to implementation, such as SL not aligning with the institution's mission and therefore not being encouraged (Furco, 2001; Weigert, 1998; Wodicka et al., 2012). As such, educators who are unwilling to commit to the extra time and effort should carefully consider their motivations for implementing SL and eSL before undertaking the task.

Nonprofit community partners may also experience challenges in SL projects including time commitments, difference in goals, lack of communication, and unwillingness to change. Time-strapped nonprofit partners need to invest time, energy, and resources to work with students on the projects, and there may be challenges with having a designated person working or devoting the time to train and supervise students (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Goal incongruence can affect projects, as while organizations are looking for end-product benefits themselves, educators are primarily concerned with the student learning outcomes, which presents a challenge (Geller et al., 2016). Lack of communication or difficulty in communication between the organization and the educator/student can also cause projects not to be completed as successfully (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Geller et al., 2016). Last, nonprofit organizations might not be as willing to open themselves to change or evaluation, which limits the number and types of SL projects (Wodicka et al., 2012). However, if making this investment, nonprofits can reap the economic and social benefits of SL projects.

A less researched area is the challenges to students who are the main benefactors of SL. Primarily, the time commitment of an additional component may present a hindrance; students are expected to interact with an organization, which increases time commitment. SL projects can also present a financial burden on students who travel to service sites or buy personal materials for the projects. Students may also not be prepared for the professional environment. They may need to dress professionally or more formally, depending on the service opportunity, and this can present an additional cost to students or cause embarrassment if they unknowingly do not follow the proper dress code (Bharath, 2015). Students need to be prepared to work with vulnerable populations and cultures different from themselves or with any other social issues that may arise during the service project (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Harris, 2017). These challenges can cause the unintended ill effect of students earning a bad reputation if they do not perform well at their service. Educators and community partners need to be aware of the potential challenges for students to ensure an equitable and fulfilling experience for all.

Institutions with motivated, interested, and trained educators face the least potential challenges to implementing effective SL courses. The main ill effect is the loss of reputation because of the poor performance of students and/or educators. Institutions that develop SL programs may lose invested resources if SL projects are not coordinated and completed correctly. For example, if institutions provide monetary support for faculty to conduct SL projects, then failed projects—that do not produce expected results—may cause financial loss to the institution. However, with proper training, planning, and implementation, these issues can be negated (Purcell, 2008).

Additional challenges for eSL include students being physically separated from the institution and the community of the educator (Maddrell, 2014a). Technology, as well as geographic locations with different time zones, can present difficulties (Waldner et al., 2010), especially in connecting participants and scheduling meetings. Students may also feel less connected to the organizations they are working with if the community partner is not in their community but another area. There is also a lesser degree of networking, as community partners and students do not meet.

The digital gap may play a part in students' ability to complete online SL projects. Even though students may register for online courses, they may not have all-day access to the Internet. The Pew Research Center shows that the digital divide exists, especially among lower-income homes. Approximately one half of households with incomes below \$30,000 do not have home broadband services, while 30% do not have a smartphone (Anderson, 2017), the primary ways that students access the Internet from their homes. Distance students, especially those in low-income homes or rural areas, may not have consistent access to the Internet to work on extra projects. Students who are working full time or who have parental duties or other time-constraining responsibilities may not have the time to invest in an additional online project, especially if their household has no Internet. The eSL project may become more of a burden for students who utilize public computers and Internet such as those available from public libraries. Since these distance students may not be near the institution, they would not be able to use the school's library, which would have extended hours. Therefore, even for these distance learners, the digital gap and other considerations may prove a hindrance to the implementation of SL projects.

Technical Writing and SL

While technical writing projects can be practiced in traditional SL courses, they are an ideal fit for eSL, as students do not need direct interaction with the organizations to complete projects. Instead, these writing projects can be completed on students' own time schedules, allowing for increased flexibility for project completion. Technical writing eSL projects overcome some of the aforementioned challenges with eSL projects while still connecting coursework to practical experience. In our globalized world, there is an increase in remote and telecommuting jobs for which employees are not at the same location. This project provides the experience of working on a team through the use of technology. Examples of these types of SL projects conducted in traditional class settings include as a policy analysis for a dentistry board (Waldner & Hunter, 2008), a review and evaluations of grant proposals for a corporation or foundation (Olberding, 2009), marketing materials for a nonprofit (Mottner, 2010), creating and implementing a social media campaigns (Messner, Medina-Messner, & Guidry, 2016), and creation of a health education brochure for an organization (Hilosky et al., 1999),

which all can be completed in eSL courses. Educators can implement eSL by providing technical writing projects for their students to connect the course materials to practical experience.

The eSL Example

This example draws from my experience teaching an online undergraduate course—Personnel and Volunteer Management in the Nonprofit Sector—with an embedded eSL component during Spring 2017 (Class 1) and Spring 2018 (Class 2) semesters. Personnel and Volunteer Management in the Nonprofit Sector is a required course for students in the university’s Nonprofit Administration concentration; it is only offered online, once per academic year. The university catalog describes the course as follows: “It examines the managerial practices and problems in recruiting, hiring and other staffing issues within nonprofit organizations. It also addresses issues of personnel leadership, accountability, and performance associated with working with volunteers.” It is an ideal class to use eSL to connect the theory of human resource management with the practical experience of human resource managers.

Project Description

Student groups created human resource materials for local area nonprofits. Groups were utilized to promote accountability (Stone, 2000) and increase the likelihood of project completion. In Class 1, four nonprofits participated and students created five products. Class 2 worked with seven organizations to produce seven products. Products included volunteer manual templates, volunteer manuals and orientation presentations, board member manuals and orientations, volunteer recruitment plans, and employee handbooks. Groups comprised three to four students who self-selected their project based on their interests and worked on the projects throughout the semester through staggered events and assignments. Reflections were expected at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. In the first semester, the SL project was implemented without outside assistance, but in the second semester, administrative support and guidance from the institutional SL office staff were utilized. This section details the steps taken during the planning and implementation stages of the courses.

Before the semester began. During the break before classes began, the instructor worked with community liaisons to identify potential organizations with appropriate human resource needs and the capacity to support students in the SL project (i.e., the organization had the time, staff, and other necessary resources to devote to the students). Identified nonprofits were e-mailed to determine their interest in partnering for the SL component. The instructor then met with each interested nonprofit to discuss the needs of the organization, determine the general scope of the proposed project, and ensure the organization’s commitment to the project.

Beginning of the semester. At the start of the semester, a sign-up sheet was created that listed the organizations and a brief description of their respective projects. Students selected their preferred project on a first-come-first-serve basis by the second week of the semester. Meetings with the student group, the nonprofit representative, and the instructor were scheduled to discuss the requirements and the complete description of the project. The goal of this meeting was to allow everyone the opportunity

to clarify roles and responsibilities and confirm project details. Students had the option to either attend the meeting in person or online (using Google Chat); most times students showed up to the meetings in person. Not all students had to be present, but there had to be a representative from each group, who conveyed the information presented to the remainder of the group. Student groups then updated the initial project description and sent it to all participants. This acted as a contract between students, community partner, and the instructor.

Assignments throughout the semester. The SL project was divided into staggered assignments. The courses were approximately four months long (mid-January through early May), taking nonclass time into account. The first graded assignment was a Nonprofit Profile, which had the goal of giving students the opportunity to learn about the organization they would be “working for” for the semester. This was due 6 weeks into the semester. Students researched the organization’s mission, values, and goals, as well as history, programs, and organizational structures. This could be done by interviewing a nonprofit representative as well as visiting the organization’s website, both of which can be completed by distance students. Students also reviewed any current materials that the organization had such as bylaws (for those working on board member manuals) or volunteer descriptions/information (for those working on volunteer recruitment plans/manuals).

Final products. Student groups then worked collectively to develop the “contracted” human resource materials with the organizations’ representatives and the instructor available for any needed assistance. Students researched best practices, standards, and guidelines and found appropriate examples to use as templates. Students submitted a graded progress report approximately one month before the final product was due and gave a graded presentation on the report. The progress report in Class 1 was a detailed outline, while in Class 2 it was a nearly completed draft of the final product. The goals of these assignments were for the students to present the information in the final product and garner feedback from the community partner and the instructor. After these two components, students completed the final products and submitted them for final grades. In Class 1, the final products were forwarded to the community partners by the instructor, and in Class 2, students submitted the final products to their nonprofit partner. Presentations and meetings were set up so students could participate online, participate in person, or create a video of the presentation to share. In addition to the final product, students also submitted a three- to five-page report that discussed their rationale for the items in their final product. For example, student groups that created a volunteer manual would provide a comprehensive manual that the nonprofit should be able to use immediately for their organization. Information relevant to the nonprofit, such as the mission, program, volunteer descriptions, and expectations, would be included in the branded resource. Since students would be working with the nonprofit throughout the semester, the nonprofit would have provided input on the resource so it would be completed and ready to use by the end of the semester. The report would justify their selection of policies and other information based on the students’ research of best practices and the connection to the course materials. Final products were graded on comprehensiveness, creativity, and meeting the organization’s needs, while the final report was graded based on the relevance and justification of selected information.

Reflections. Students were assigned reflection exercises at three points during the semester: the beginning (first week), midpoint (before semester break), and at the end (at the same time as final reports). Reflections were graded (less than 5% of course grade) more to ensure completion of assignment than content, as these were to gauge the way students experienced change due to SL. Reflection questions asked the benefits and challenges to the SL project and whether the project helped with the understanding of the coursework and areas for improvement.

Project Outcomes

The projects were successful in providing community partners with identified resources. Students also showed positive outcomes but also noted the challenges of the project. In total, 30 students submitted the final reflection and responses were coded for themes. Responses correlated with outcomes suggested in the literature, as students described the positive effects of SL as gaining real-life experience and understanding the HR professional position (22), learning skills and résumé building (15), connecting practice to the course materials (17), helping the organization and community (14), and networking (6).¹ In contrast the challenges included the lack of face-to-face communication (13), working with a group/difficult group members (10), time (11), issues with the organization (5), lack of clarity with the assignment (4), and lack of interest, as they already had the experience and skills the project would provide (4). Some students saw the positive associated with the challenges. For example, eight students (73%) who reported time as a challenge noted that the experience was worth the effort. Students (60%) who described challenges with group work noted that it also allowed for the development of teamwork and leadership skills.

High-quality products were resources that the community partner could use as is, with little or no editing, and met the criteria in the assignment rubrics that were provided with the assignment. Unsuccessful projects needed heavy editing or were incomplete. Overall, 83% of projects were completed successfully by students, and all but one community partner received their agreed upon final product. In Class 1, one project was not as successful, as it was of poor quality when submitted and the instructor had to complete it before submission to the nonprofit. In Class 2, one organization did not receive their resource due to student attrition. Overall, while there were challenges to student participation, the courses were deemed a success.

Using best practices. Much thought and detail went into the planning and development of the project. Appropriate nonprofits were identified and their roles and expectations were explained and confirmed. The initial meetings were extremely helpful in developing the “contract,” allowing for role and goal clarity for all participants. Constant communication was also essential, with the instructor regularly emailing students and community partners to ensure that projects were moving forward. Even though there was a “contract” between participants on the project, communication was necessary to ensure that all participants were fulfilling their roles. For example, a community partner representative (the volunteer coordinator) stopped responding to a student group and students did not inform the instructor until after the midpoint of the semester. Once notified, the instructor contacted the executive director of the organization, who determined that the employee was not completing the assigned tasks for the organization. The employee was subsequently terminated and the executive

¹Numbers in parentheses are the number of responses for each theme.

director stepped in to complete the project with the students. However, because of the lack of communication initially, that student group had a large amount of time without organizational leadership and guidance. They successfully completed the project but noted that the lack of direction was stressful.

The course content was an appropriate fit for SL. Human resource management, while a people-centered profession, also has a heavy connection to technical writing. Effective human resource managers need to have systems, policies, and procedures in place to ensure the smooth running of their departments. However, this can be the “less sexy” side of the profession. This project allowed students to gain experience in a role that they might not have been aware of, in a traditional classroom experience.

Staggered graded assignments helped keep students accountable and allowed the community partners to provide input during the creation of final products. It also allowed the community partners and instructor to gauge the quality of work being developed. For example, in Class 1, one group struggled with the assignment, submitting work late and that was not as polished as other groups’ work. This was a cue that the group needed extra help to complete the project, and they received additional attention to improve the final product. However, the instructor still had to edit the product before it could be given to the community partner. If the final product was the only graded component, then the product would have been a failed attempt for both student grades and community partner resource.

Finally, participants were flexible with each other and understood that this was a learning exercise. This helped lessen tense situations and reduce frustrations when students did not turn in high-quality or submitted late work, or when community partners did not respond, or when scheduling conflicts arose. Understanding the goal of the project as well as the connection to the material allowed for increased flexibility and willingness to work as a team to the end.

Addressing Challenges

Implementation of an eSL course is challenging, but careful planning and implementation can lead to success. The challenges in Class 1 allowed for the identification of issues that were implemented as changes to Class 2. The time commitment was the greatest challenge. This was lessened in the second class with the administrative assistance of the SL office. However, grading and editing of final products were time consuming tasks, as to be expected. For this challenge, Class 2’s progress reports were expected to be near to finished products, instead of a detailed outline as previously assigned. This ensured higher quality work was produced, as all participants had a good idea of the final product, gave/received feedback, and students were accountable for the resource given to the partner. In fact, one organization was so impressed they had the student group present the resource to their board. Overall, the updated project design decreased the time spent on editing final products and allowed for increased student accountability.

The selection of groups and group size also presented issues. Class 1 had 18 enrolled students and Class 2 had 25. Groups were designed to have three to four students each, which was reflected in the sign-up sheet. Students who did not select a group by the deadline for self-selection were assigned a group, usually the one with the least number of students. This presented a challenge, as if these students continued not to participate but not withdraw (this happened with two students in each class), then the

group would have fewer active participants from the start of the course. The instructor reached out to the students who were not participating in class, to discuss their lack of participation in the group work. If there was no reply, students were removed from their assigned group so as not to cause a burden on participating students. When there was the possibility of smaller groups, the instructor contacted members to determine if they were comfortable with the smaller group size or if there was a need to recruit members from other larger groups—an option that no one selected. In each class, three students withdrew and two did not participate (Table 1). Unexpectedly, this attrition affected a single group in both classes, causing the group to become a single person. In Class 1, this was agreeable for the student who preferred to work alone and an extremely high-quality resource was developed. In Class 2, the student was willing to work alone but eventually withdrew from the class due to personal issues and the community partner did not receive the resource. Community partners were aware of this possibility and, in this instance, the community partner was understanding. At the beginning of the semester, group sizes ranged from three to four people in a group, but by the end the range increased from one to four people in a group.

Table 1*Student Completion Rates for Described eSL Courses*

Project information	Class 1	Class 2
Students enrolled	18	25
Number of projects	5	7
Completed	13 (72%)	19 (76%)
Withdraw	3 (17%)	3 (12%)
Nonparticipant	2 (11%)	2 (8%)
Incomplete		1 (4%)

Other challenges were less expected. For example, not all students saw the value in SL opportunities. In Class 2 specifically, students stated that they should not be required to do SL in online courses (even though the course was listed as an SL course when they registered). Some stated they already had the professional experience and only wanted the theoretical knowledge from the class. The instructor provided videos on SL and attempted to demonstrate the direct connection of course materials and project as well as benefits to students (e.g., networking and résumé building). However, in the final reflections, at least one third of the students noted that though they understood the reasons for the projects, they did not think it should be required of them. This was not the case in the previous year, where only one student negatively reflected that they felt used and that the community partner should pay for the work produced. The lack of interest in SL from students in Class 2 was thought-provoking, and it would be even more interesting to see if this was a stand-alone case or a trend in eSL courses.

Technology was not a challenge in these eSL courses, as students had reliable access to the appropriate technology and were capable of using it correctly. This course is only offered once an academic year and solely online, and as such, the majority of students who were enrolled did so as they had no other choice, rather than preference or need for online courses. Students were, therefore, able to participate in face-to-face

meetings and presentations for the most part. True distance students were able to access the online platforms for meetings and one even opted to submit a video presentation. While technology was not a challenge for this course, it is a consideration for other eSL projects.

Discussion

Educators can have different roles in higher education ranging from the disseminators of knowledge to the development of students into democratic citizens (Bryer, 2014; Lebovits & Bharath, 2019). Regardless of the role that educators choose for themselves, SL can help meet their goals for student outcomes and engage distance students by combining the academic knowledge with practical experience.

The benefits of SL and eSL outweigh the challenges to their implementation. However, these benefits are more impactful in SL projects that follow the best practices suggested by the plethora of research on the topic. Careful planning and constant communication are needed to ensure the success of SL programs. Educators wishing to conduct similar projects in their classrooms can learn from this experience and use the suggestions and discussion of challenges to improve implementation.

To increase effectiveness of the projects, the instructor can implement feedback loops so that all participants receive feedback (Waldner et al., 2012). In this project, students were evaluated, but no feedback was given to or received from the organizations and instructor; however, students who are directly working on projects would have the most practical advice on how to improve the project. Educators can use feedback from the organization and the students to adjust the class to a more successful experience. For example, the community partners' perceived benefits have not been established in this study, but a feedback loop could have provided this information. A more robust feedback loop system allows for the evaluation of all participants and can lead to increased effectiveness of future projects. Reflection is an integral part of the SL experience and needs to connect the assigned project to the course materials explicitly (Dubinsky, 2006). The reflections for this course were designed to determine if there were changes in the students' understanding of the material instead of being geared toward an introspective reflection exercise that allows for student growth. More research needs to be explored for instructors to attempt a more vigorous reflection that has the effects of increased critical thinking about the experience and overall, deeper learning and understanding of the course materials. Specifically, for this course, the reflection needs to allow for an increased understanding of a professional role.

Student accountability needs to increase, as grades were not enough motivation for some students to deliver high-quality work. There should be a focus on the benefits of the final product to students (e.g., résumé builder) and the community partner (fulfilling a nonprofit need) to show the importance of the project. Following best practices, meaningful projects need to engage students in and outside of the classroom. In addition submitting final products to the organization, students can also make presentations to the organization's board (as one group in the second class did) or be included in the organization's communications (newsletters, annual reports, etc.). One organization informed the students of their financial benefit to the organization (how much the product would cost if contracted out), demonstrating the importance of the product. Students can also be responsible for finding and selecting their own organizations to

work with, which can lead to increased accountability and buy-in. While this would lessen the amount of pre-semester planning, it may be a challenge for students with limited social networks in the field. It is necessary to find ways to engage students for increased accountability.

There were also challenges with students not wanting to participate in the project; thus, SL projects can also be optional (Stone, 2000), with hypothetical case studies for students who prefer those assignments. Educators would still receive the same product to be graded and students would still be able to apply the theory from coursework, but community partners would not benefit. SL and eSL can also be implemented primarily in elective courses to ensure students are willing to participate and decrease the risk of student complaint (Playford et al., 2017). Group work also presented challenges. This could be addressed by partnering students with individual community partners for a smaller final product. This would potentially entail more work for the instructor, who has to broker relationships with many more community partners, and would also decrease the potential for leadership and teamwork outcomes.

Finally, student appreciation and valuation of the project need to be considered. A system needs to be in place to ensure organizations are formally thanking the students for their work. In this course, organization representatives expressed their thanks verbally during the presentations and each explained to their groups the value and importance of the material that was created. However, since this was a group project, not all students had to be present for the presentation and students had the option to present a video instead. Not all students would have heard verbal acknowledgments of their work, which was demonstrated as two students noted that they felt used by the organization. To avoid such issues, organizations can write a formal thank-you or another form of recognition (e.g., thanking students in their newsletter or on their social media platforms). Students also worried if the product would be used. Community partners can find ways to show the effect of the product by following up with students after the course has ended and letting them know of the benefit of the product implemented in their organization.

It should also be understood that SL and eSL projects are not for everyone. Educators who wish to implement these experiential learning techniques need to understand the commitment and resources required. SL and eSL are not advised for educators who do not have resources to be successful, such as institutional support, or who are not trained or well versed in SL as a pedagogical tool. The lack of resources and knowledge could result in failure, which negatively affects students, educator, community partner, and institutions. Interested educators need to prepare accordingly to address these challenges.

Even without institutional resources, SL and eSL can be implemented in the classroom. There is a plethora of research and practical resources on SL and eSL that can be used as a starting point for interested educators. Instructors need to do preliminary research on best practices before planning projects. The design is important and needs to be taken seriously for successful projects. Instructors could also start with small projects and develop relationships with community partners who could become more committed and engaged in the process. For example, instead of creating an entire resource, students could perhaps review already created materials and provide suggestions for improvement. Students would still have the experience of working with the

materials but would not be responsible for a semester-long project. This also provides the instructor with experience in designing and implementing projects and can pave the way for projects that are more involved in the future.

The case described herein provides an example of the application of eSL to an online course. Educators interested in implementing eSL projects for future online courses should not think of distance education as a barrier to success; instead, it is a way to creatively connect students to course materials through the use of technology. eSL allows educators to connect distance students with opportunities that nontraditional students may not have such as work experience and networking opportunities. By using technical writing projects in eSL courses, educators can improve students' technical writing skills, connect course materials to practical experience, develop students' résumés, and provide a needed resource for a community partner. The use of best practices by willing participants can lead to increased positive outcomes for all involved. As the field moves more and more to the online world, we as educators need to adapt as well. Nonprofit educators teach in an applied field and should find ways to connect theory with practice. eSL allows for meeting student and community needs, making the educational experience more beneficial for all.

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