

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Using Community Listening to Collaboratively Develop an Assignment with Students

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Overview

Assignments often take a few iterations to get just right so that students consistently produce the essay, project, or presentation the instructor had in mind, let alone demonstrate the assignment's learning objectives. What would happen if instructors modeled "community listening" (Jackson & Whitehorse DeLaune; Rowan & Cavallaro), or listening across differences, in the development of an assignment with students? While perhaps uncomfortable at first, developing an assignment together can be a generative way to discuss audience and research while also leveraging the different intersectional positions that instructors and students occupy to understand an assignment and its goals more deeply.

To that end, this activity collaboratively develops an assignment description for a profile of a community partner with students, but it can easily be adapted for a different assignment. In doing so, the instructor and students practice community listening multiple times: they listen across differences between exemplars, between the "rhetorical moves" (Jacobson, Pawlowski, & Tardy) identified by small groups, and between ideas for the assignment description.

The process for this assignment is modeled after the three phases of community engagement: entering the community, working with the community, and withdrawing ethically from the community. That is, you have entered the classroom community together; you will work with students to develop the criteria for this assignment; and then you

will take a step back as they execute the assignment in the way that best suits the rhetorical situation you've determined together. The instructor has ample opportunities to model community listening and come together with students to identify and achieve mutual goals for this assignment with regard to the task, purpose, audience, goals, and criteria for success in advance of completing the assignment (not to mention, exert a semblance of authority over those rhetorical elements, thereby placing students and instructors on more equal levels (Knobloch)).

The practice of collaboratively developing an assignment can help improve students' ability to accurately imagine audiences for professional and community-engaged writing. This activity requires community listening, and because of the increased level of authority students can have over the assignment (and therefore, one would hope, their increased investment in it), the activity can help foster a positive attitude toward audience awareness.

Time Commitment

1.5 class meetings.

Materials

Access to "Make Your 'Move': Writing in Genres" by Brad Jacobson, Madelyn Pawlowski, & Christine M. Tardy in *Writing Spaces* Volume 4 and examples of the genre of the assignment (this can be student work from previous classes and/or public examples of the genre, such as letters to the editor, journal articles, infographics, etc.). Students and instructors should have access to a collaborative Google document, as well. In the appendix is the collaboratively developed assignment description from Spring 2024 and a blank version of the assignment development Google document referenced below.

Activity Process

- First, students complete a [rhetorical moves analysis](#) of examples of the genre of the assignment.
 - Students should work in small groups and each group chooses 1-2 examples to read in class. The groups use the guidelines and examples available in “[Make Your ‘Move’: Writing in Genres](#)” by Jacobson, Pawlowski, & Tardy to identify and analyze the moves this genre makes.
 - Then, each group informally presents a summary of the moves they identified as well as the general purpose and expectations of the genre the moves indicate to the class.
- During whole group sharing and discussion, the class as a whole compares and contrasts the moves identified by each group. You might consider keeping a running list for reference. This helps identify variations and options for rhetorical moves as well as common language features within a genre and positions students to complete an effective assignment.
- Then, work together as a class to develop this assignment by describing the task, purpose, audience, goals, and criteria for success for the assignment, as informed by the rhetorical moves of the genre at hand.
 - For this part of the assignment, I ask students to collaboratively contribute to an assignment development google document (see appendix for a blank version of this). You can also ask students to turn and talk with those nearest them about each section first before adding their ideas. Other options for collaboration at this juncture include asking a student scribe to keep track of contributions shared

aloud and/or recording contributions on the board as they're shared aloud.

- Then, we step back and read through the responses together and discuss them. I usually ask how the contributions to each section of the document relate to one another, how they can be synthesized, grouped, and about how to potentially resolve any contrasting ideas. While we discuss, I add notes to the document, many times recording the exact words students are using during discussion.
- Synthesize and organize the ideas students proposed in the document during class into a coherent and complete assignment description before the next class.
- Take a few moments to read the assignment description aloud during the next class. Ask students what is potentially missing and/or incorrect, what they especially like, and what seems like it could be improved. Discuss whether the assignment feels appropriate—as in, does it feel both achievable and sufficiently challenging?
 - This could also be an opportunity to discuss (and perhaps adjust) the due date(s) for the assignment. Usually, we make only minor edits to the assignment description at this point.
- Finally, the assignment is ready to be used!

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Practice rhetorical analysis and community listening skills in an effort to enhance audience awareness

- Analyze and discuss purposes for writing and rhetoric as dictated by the genre assigned (in the case of community partner/project profiles, examples of how writing and rhetoric are used to build community and take action in various communities and contexts)
- Practice entering and withdrawing ethically from community engagement and working across differences to craft and achieve shared goals
- Strengthen observation, research, synthesis, writing, and collaboration skills in the service of course objectives as well as student and instructor desires

Learning Accommodations

- This activity can be facilitated in-person, asynchronously, digitally, or a combination thereof.

Works Cited

- Jackson, Rachel C., and Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune. "Decolonizing Community Writing with Community Listening: Story, Transrhetorical Resistance, and Indigenous Cultural Literacy Activism." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.25148/clj.13.1.009089>.
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- Knobloch, Katherine R., and Tamanda Chabvuta. "Dialogic Listening as a Tool for Community-Centred Transformation: How Students Construct Listening through Community Agreements." *International Journal of*

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2025.2525111>.

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Appendix A

Assignment Development Collaborative Document

Assignment 3: Community Partner + Project Profile

Instructions: Please share your thoughts under each section below. You do not need to sign your name to your contributions. Feel free to choose a fun font color!

Task (What is the task of this assignment, according to our analysis & needs?):

Audience (Who is the audience of these profiles?):

Purpose (What is the purpose of these profiles, according to our analysis & needs?):

In order to earn a PASS, your Community Partner + Project Profile must...(What criteria for success should be articulated for this assignment? In other words, what must a Community Partner + Project profile have in order to earn a Pass?):

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Spring 2024 Collaboratively Developed Community Project Profile Assignment

It's important as community-engaged scholars that we have a deep understanding of our community partners so that we can work closely and efficiently together. This also signals respect and care for our partners when we do our own research on their purpose, practices, and programs. To that end, assignment three is meant to help facilitate gathering and making sense of more information about your community partner in service of your community action project with them.

Task: Your task is to answer the who, what, where, when, why, and how of your community partner in the form of a profile. That is, explain who your community partner is, what their mission is, how they put it into action, and the larger issue at the heart of their work. You might also include your community partner's goals and desires. In addition to describing your partner, you should put your partner and project into conversation with concepts from course readings to examine how it functions and connects to knowledge in the field of writing studies and community engagement.

Audience: Your profile should be written for a general audience. That is, it should be legible and helpful for people interested in learning more about your community partner as well as academics

interested in writing and community engagement. Your community partners themselves might also benefit from reading and sharing your profile with their stakeholders, such as potential funders, community members, volunteers, board members, employees, etc. Another audience to consider is the center for community engagement, including students affiliated with the center, the staff at the center, faculty members affiliated with the center, and other community partners. Overall, please do your best to indicate a specific (chosen) audience for this assignment if that is most meaningful for your partner and project.

Goals: The goal of this assignment is to help you

- bring awareness to the initiative/ organization;
- share stories that may otherwise not be visible;
- create easily digestible knowledge that shares important information;
- practice talking about your community partner in an effort to center their work, their stakeholders, and their goals and desires;
- collaborate with your project group to build a deeper understanding of your community partner to facilitate working closely and efficiently with one another; and
- identify gaps in your knowledge of your community partner and provide opportunities to fill those gaps in service of the assignment and the larger community action project.

In order to earn a PASS, your community program/ project profile must...

- Answer who, what, where, when, why, and how for your community partner's work.

- This may include quantitative data and/or qualitative data.
- Be written in clear and accessible language for a generalist audience.
- Make a substantive connection to at least 1 concept from course readings.
- Be at least 3 double-spaced pages long (or 750 words) or at least 5 slides long; the profile could also take the form of an instagram/ social media profile or a multimodal document that is the equivalent of 5 slides; if you go the multimodal/ social media route, please also include a brief rationale for the choices your group made.