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Critical Reflection

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If I were to describe my internship in one word it would be collaboration. From start to finish I had to collaborate on different projects and tasks, with both my agency mentor and the other student working for the same nonprofit organization. More importantly I had to learn the best way to collaborate. This internship wasn’t about completing a task, but about determining the best way to go about approaching a project that would provide the best results to the agency mentor and ultimately benefit the nonprofit organization. I’ve decided to organize this critical reflection of my internship experience by first explaining how and why I decided to complete the projects in the manner I did, and then focus on key points in the process that proved to be turning points in the process, but also how I felt about the work I was doing.

In “Establishing Community Partnerships Projects and Goals,” Crystal S. Aschenbrener writes of the importance of setting goals. By focusing “on a set of purposeful goals rather than a set number of hours” (p. 165) the experience for the nonprofit organization and the student will be more pleasurable and beneficial to both parties involved. After reading this I found myself wondering what would make my internship beneficial to me. Would I be happy to complete specific projects and goals along the way? Or, would I feel more useful logging hours and experiencing first hand how the nonprofit organization operates? Before I started my internship I was unsure of which approach would be the best for me and the nonprofit, but I did know that the best way to find out was to set very specific goals. This article proved detrimental in how I approached the first meeting with my agency mentor.   
 I went to that first meeting thinking about the best way establish the goals of the internship for both me, and the nonprofit organization. I knew I couldn’t think of that meeting as an opportunity for me to explain what was expected of me based on the learning outcomes of the class. I had to think of the internship as an intersection of the classroom and work, or an opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and application. As an instructor and PhD student I exist in both worlds. I am a teacher, and a student. It is easy to exist in these spaces when they are clearly outlined for me. I set out to be as transparent as possible in the first meeting with Ceci, my agency mentor. She gave me a lot of background information on the nonprofit organization. At the time I felt overwhelmed by how much they did, and was confused as to how it would benefit me if I were only there to revise and redesign brochures. Now, I know how important those conversations proved to be. I was clear and open about what my role could and couldn’t be based on class discussions about the differences between an internship and volunteering. Ceci responded with clear expectations and hopes for what my work could do for CEPCO. By explaining to me the importance of having brochures that looked more professional, and were more appealing to an audience by requiring on less text to deliver their message I was able to immediately see how the project related to my studies in RWS.

My agency mentor explained CEPCO’s desire to have a brochure that would entice students to volunteer for the nonprofit organization, and/or motivate people to donate. With a clear set of goals I was able to begin my internship. In the beginning the most challenging aspect was making decisions about the best way to go about completing the project. Knowing that CEPCO had issues updating their brochures meant I was limited to only using a program that they would also have access to, and could easily use to make any changes in the future if they desired. The freedom to make these types of decisions made me nervous, but also feel like an empowered student. Aschenbrener writes that when a student is empowered “inspires students as they make a difference for their assigned community partner” (p. 167). I knew of the importance the brochures, and while it was not the most exciting project to work on if done well it could help CEPCO recruit volunteers, and donors. My initial decision was to use Word and PowerPoint to make the brochures.

After coming to an agreement on the projects I would complete with my agency mentor, and spending time gathering information and thinking about the best way to go about completing the brochure I was finally ready to start putting it all together. This was the most challenging aspect of the internship. I was working remotely. Communicating with my agency mentor was easy, but I was unsure of when to contact her. Did I contact her to ask several questions throughout the first few weeks to make sure I was doing things correctly? Or, do I make a brochure to the best of my ability and understanding of what CEPCO wants and needs and then set up a meeting to discuss a draft of the brochure? I settled on waiting to meet with Ceci until I had a more complete draft. The initial problems I had in creating the brochure were a result of using Word and PowerPoint. It was logical to use these programs, because it would be easy for Ceci, and Pastor Rose Mary to update them as needed in the future, but that didn’t necessarily mean they would look as professional as I knew they wanted.

While I was working through those issues I was constantly questioning my decisions. Why was I doing what I did? Were brochures too simple a project? In “Service Learning: Engaging Writers with Their Communities” Baca (2012) writes “students should not only know; students should be able to do,” (p. ix), but was I doing enough? Was I going to make a difference by applying some of what I have learned in my RWS classes? At this point I realized I didn’t need to question what I was doing, rather I needed to make the connections between the process and what I have learned as both a student and instructor at UTEP. In March I was trying to figure out the best way to reach my audience, because the purposes I had in redesigning and updating the brochures varied. Part of my audience was made up of the women running the nonprofit organizations, and then there was the audience that would receive the information about CEPCO and the Border Immersion Program. I understand different ways to reach an audience, and I understand that genres will impact how a message is delivered to an audience. Genres account for certain affordances and limitations.

Nora Bacon’s “The Trouble with Transfer: Lessons from a Study of Community Service Writing” addresses the importance of skills developed in school transferring to other settings. Writers’ choices are a result of their knowledge. Bacon explains that a “writer makes lexical and syntactic choices governed by an enormously complex set of constraints” (p. 55). She continues exploring the impact of genres in writing by drawing attention to the choices writers make and how these are dependent “upon their understanding of the genre and rhetorical context in which they are working” (p. 55). For me I had to think a lot of what a brochure is, and what it should do in addition to the expectations of the nonprofit organization and those that read it. I see this as another example of collaboration, but between the intended audiences of the brochures and me.

Everyone has expectations, and with a brochure I had to use a small amount of text, but the design needed to catch the attention of the audience. Photos that were appropriate for the message would need to be skillfully placed within each panel of the brochure, and color schemes would also be of great importance. If I used dark colors, then it would create the required serious and professional tone, but it wouldn’t necessarily be appropriate for a brochure full of pictures of children. It was at this point in the process of putting together these brochures that I realized knowledge of delivery in a digital space and composing in that space would transfer to other mediums. In the work I was doing, I had to use my knowledge of composing in a digital space while also being critically aware of how different it may look on paper, but also understanding how that would impact delivery of the message.

Working through these issues, and applying my knowledge of rhetoric and writing made the project more appealing to me on a personal level, but it didn’t make me feel any more connected to the community or the nonprofit organization. A lot of these feelings were the result of working off-site, and not immersing myself in the work CEPCO does. Looking back on my internship I realize that this was an opportunity missed by me. I was so intent on not appearing as a volunteer that I closed myself off to engaging with the nonprofit and the community it serves. The writing and revising I did with the help of my agency mentor was collaborative, and it served a purpose, but I’m not certain I can say that I was truly engaged, or participating in the social aspect of writing regardless of the fact that I enjoyed creating the brochures for CEPCO and the Border Immersion Program.

Another important area to consider during the process of creating the brochures was editing and revising the text. I didn’t write new text. My job was to condense the existing text, and help make the information easier to understand for the audiences. According to Bacon, (1999) writers must be aware of how “different rhetorical contexts call for different choices about how to say it” (p. 58), which I think is evident in how a writer approaches delivering the content to the audience. When I felt comfortable about the choices I made I realized I had to explain them, because the rhetorical knowledge I possess may not be as apparent to my agency mentor. Or, areas of concern for me weren’t of concern for my mentor because she was thinking of editing text, when I was thinking about arrangement and delivery playing out in the design of the brochures. This ultimately forced me to use a different program to make the brochures. I couldn’t achieve the level of professionalism and visual appeal with Word or PowerPoint. This change made everything easier for me, and it was the first time I felt as though the work I was doing was important. It wasn’t until I saw how much better the brochures were looking that I felt more confident about my work. I knew I had made the correct choice in using a different program, and I was finally able to produce brochures that look professional, contain all the important information, and were visually appealing.

This internship blurred the lines. I was in charge of projects, set goals for myself, but also had to meet expectations of my agency mentor and complete projects set to her liking. This was very different from work I submit for a class. In a classroom setting I receive feedback, and after that it is up to me to continue on with the project or paper. Working with Ceci meant that I was always turning in work and making revisions. It was never done until she was happy. There was always something to revise and a way to improve the brochure. I was happy to make the changes because every time she suggested one she was so excited. She was genuinely pleased with the work I was doing. Communicating with her was easy and enjoyable. The more excited she was the more quickly I wanted to work so that she could see the final product she wanted.

At the end of the internship I completed two brochures, and helped Michael brainstorm and make small edits to the videos he made. We set out to do more. The original agreement was to create three brochures, three videos, and update the website. Collectively we made two brochures, two videos, and updated the website. One of my brochures never received feedback due to Pastor Rose Mary’s illness, but I am hoping to meet with her as soon as she has fully recovered to finish the brochure. This class is not about finishing a task to earn a grade. It’s about attempting to establish connections with the community the nonprofit organization serves. I feel lucky because I enjoyed working with Ceci and Pastor Rose Mary. I see great value in what they do, and plan to volunteer with CEPCO in the fall. It may not have been an instant connection forged between CEPCO and me, but over time I was able to learn more about what CEPCO does and I’m eager to become part of their team of volunteers.

Works Cited

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