

# Chapter IX

## Technology Leverages a Community University Collaboration

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reports on two University of Southern California collaborations that partner business communication classes with not-for-profit agencies. It argues that technology-enhanced community-based collaborations support university initiatives and empower students to be better business writers, engage in community issues, and prepare for 21<sup>st</sup> century communication strategies. Because business requires teams, networks, and technological communication to operate within a diverse global workplace, business schools need to prepare students to professionally manage the communication decisions and media. Furthermore, it asserts that the collaborations among faculty and the university administrators undergird and promote these undergraduate community projects. It examines the background, goals, issues, assessments, future plans, and recommendations for leveraging university-community projects with technology.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the weeks following 9/11, Lehman Brothers conducted business from computers set up in near-by New York hotels and businesses, accessed their remote back-up data storage, and produced the first new issuance bond offering on the Stock

Exchange (Anderson, 2007). The company's ability to electronically collaborate after such a disaster validated my sense that multilevel collaboration supported by technology proves more indispensable every day. It reinforced my goal to provide my students with the skills to collaborate successfully in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Helping students to succeed in the world's global enterprise necessitates catalyzing the synergy that results from a technology-enhanced community-based collaboration. My classes, therefore, have partnered with not-for-profit agencies in order to create recommendations for communication changes or to create business documents. The teams rely primarily on technology to communicate with one another, the agency, and me. Forrester's research argues that "technology and social changes are creating a potent mix of forces that will transform the way all businesses—not just media firms—operate, create products, and relate to customers". This shift, which Forrester calls "social computing," and defines as "a social structure in which technology puts power in communities, not institutions," (Charron, 2006, p. 1) validates my assignments for two classes: Advanced Writing for Business, and Communication Strategy for Business. Both have partnered with not-for-profit agencies and relied on social computing to conduct and to assess their projects.

## **BACKGROUND**

In these classes, I compare a moving slinky toy to the communication process; the metal helix changes shape as it's squeezed and rolled. One move catalyzes the next so the fluidity masks the independent steps. Response to its surroundings propels its movement. Similarly, as the communicator repeatedly considers the audience's probable attitudes, values, potential questions, and refutation, she alters her own perception of the content and the organization of the text. This process, commonly unrecognized by student writers, becomes more evident when business people and electronic narratives intervene and compel frequent analyses. Introducing technology which promotes self-reflection, peer-to-peer reviews, and professional assessment increases students' awareness and experience with the communication process.

When student writers engage in a recursive process, generated by the communication need an agency has, they experience a sense of dissonance or a demand that calls on their critical thinking and ultimately produces a product that's mediated through peers' and professional managers' potential or real responses. What distinguishes a generalized approach to process writing from the writing for business, is the know-how to prewrite, revise, and create the professional document that Michaels (2007) would say works "in the discipline." In order to increase opportunities for students to experience this process as it's enacted in business, I establish community partnerships and employ technology as a means to achieve the learning outcomes. Although I provide top-down oversight, individual decisions are made by the students and agency. These self-managed teams depend on technology to create documents, interact, and assess.

Many more opportunities for rhetorical decisions become apparent to the communication students when they partner with a not-for-profit business. Most need to learn how to move from a linear individual communication process designed for a classroom audience. In my communication classes, the students learn how to assess the agency's needs and values, consider peer's and client's comments, and see how their parts fit into the completed product. They learn how to analyze and write for multiple audiences, select the appropriate channels, multiply approaches to organizing a message, respond to feedback, and assess the process.

## **Evolving Technology-Enhanced Learning Experiences**

Today, all of my classes rely on electronic technology to facilitate and measure the learning outcomes, but twenty years ago when I started teaching undergraduates at another university, my classes only used *Daedalus* software to increase discussion and increase an interactive writing

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