

The Sound You Never Forget

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Reflection

Even though I've been teaching community writing projects in my Professional Writing courses for the past six years, each semester brings surprising learning moments, realizations, and new characters into the classroom. No two community writing projects are ever the same, even when working with the same organization over multiple semesters. Over the course of a six-year partnership with Habitat, for example, the classes have moved from creating promotional content about Habitat's programs, to collaboratively writing Habitat Homeowner profile articles, to helping the staff at Habitat develop a writing culture within their workplace. Since this long-term relationship has deepened, Habitat now trusts my students to work with the beneficiaries of their services – the homeowners – which is a much more closely entwined collaboration than having students revise and update their brochures. Last semester, students traveled all around the county to sit down, interview, and collaboratively write and edit these articles with Habitat's homeowners. That particular project isn't included in this essay because this series of vignettes only captures snapshots of my first semester incorporating community writing projects into my Professional Writing classroom. But this piece aims to highlight how community writing adds a unique sense of life and personality to a course, even when projects don't go exactly as planned.

The Sound You Never Forget

"When I was a student in this classroom thirty years ago, the professor used to smoke cigarettes while delivering lectures!" Frank leans back in the desk, which seems toy-sized for his large frame. He props his feet on another desk and yawns loudly. The director of our local Habitat for Humanity affiliate hadn't told me that she was bringing her husband to class, yet here they both are in the dank basement classroom of the humanities building.

My students, mostly business majors whose classes primarily occur in our new multi-million dollar business building, look both alarmed and amused. A few of them shift uncomfortably in stiff, wrinkled suits that a finance professor requires them to wear on Wednesdays. I notice some students slyly recording Snapchat videos of Frank, but he seems unaware, which is surprising only because he had just told us about his private detective business, "Silver Eagle Investigations, LLC."

Once Melody gets her slideshow pulled up, she starts to talk about the work that Habitat for Humanity does in our community and the projects that the students will be creating for our community writing project. They listen to her keenly, probably re-

lied to have a break from hearing me lecture at them about the importance of using the “you attitude” in business writing, or how to format a report or write a persuasive proposal. As Melody delivers her presentation, the students ask questions about how the community typically responds to Habitat’s work and messaging, and they seem excited that their writing could make an impact in the community. The students start chiming in with ideas about how Habitat could share their projects on social media or post flyers around the ReStore for customers who aren’t as tech-savvy. It’s obvious that this project is already engaging them more than writing another hypothetical memo to Michael Scott.

While Melody answers the students’ questions, Frank drifts off to sleep. He’s probably heard Melody’s spiel before. He never really explains why he’s here, and I don’t ask. Melody nudges him awake at the end of the class and before she leaves, the students and I thank her for joining us and for letting us work on writing projects with Habitat this semester.

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In the next class period, another section of Professional Writing students is partnering with our local animal shelter. The director, Willie, is in class, along with Princess, an adoptable mutt who’s been living at the shelter. Princess is the size of a Chihuahua but has long, wiry hair and manic blue eyes that dart anxiously around the room. Willie doesn’t have a slideshow and he wants us to sit in a large circle, so we rearrange the chairs.

“Students, do you know why you need to get your pets neutered and spayed?” he asks, pushing his dark hair away from his eyes. Princess lets out a low whine. This group of students is quieter than the morning class, and they look at Willie nervously, wearing similar expressions as Princess.

“Because left to their own devices, they’ll bang anything that moves and overpopulate the earth! I heard a German Shepherd with a Golden Retriever in heat the other week, and let me tell you, that’s a sound you never forget.” Willie purses his lips and lets out a high-pitched, feral moan, forcing eye contact with each student as he makes sounds that have probably never been made in this building before. I silently hope that my Department Head doesn’t walk down the hallway.

As Willie talks, some of the students jot down notes in their notebooks, though I’m not sure about what—the sounds of mating dogs, or the romance between a German Shepherd and a Golden Retriever, maybe. None of these topics are directly related to our project that is supposed to help spread literacy about animal health for the shelter, or maybe they are. Since I’m letting Willie take the lead on deciding what the students write, maybe these mating intonations *will* be useful for their brochures.

It’s my first semester partnering with community organizations, and I’m learning to release control, something that doesn’t come naturally to type-A instructors like myself. Although I usually have the semester’s projects planned months in advance, I quickly realize that this level of planning is impossible when I’m bringing community partners into the classroom. The 16-week semester timeline means as little to them as syllabus policies about sleeping during lectures or bringing animals into campus

buildings (since Princess isn't a service dog, she's not technically allowed to be with us right now). By ignoring the manufactured rigidity of the academy, these community partners reinvigorate the classroom. We're no longer going through the same routine of lectures and think-pair-shares; instead, we're spontaneous, not sure what will be said or how we'll react. Nobody's eyes are glued to the clock.

Princess disappears behind a pile of backpacks, and after a moment a student raises her hand to say, "Um, Willie? Princess just peed on the floor."

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In the third class of the day, another community partner with a doctorate from Harvard uses words that are probably beyond half of the students' comprehension. Reba delivers a lecture about the state of our community's health and wellbeing. She pushes students to fight for equity through personal commitments and by arguing for policy, system, and environmental reforms. She explains how the infographics that students are creating for this project will help the nonprofit increase health literacy in the community, since the students will translate complex topics about nutrition into image and narrative-driven infographics. Reba tells stories about food deserts in our community and neighborhoods that are cut off from our public transportation system, and students look shocked to learn about the inequality that exists right outside of our campus walls.

When one student asks, "Well, if they aren't happy in that neighborhood, can't they just move?" Reba is quick to respond.

"Do you remember when you moved into your dorm? Did your parents help you pack up and move in?"

The student nods.

"Right, and you probably had to pay a security deposit, and maybe some other fees in addition to the rent?"

The student nods again.

"And if you have a lot of furniture that you're moving, and no truck, there's another cost for the U-Haul. All of these fees add up and make it very difficult to *just move*. And that's assuming that people can get out of their leases, and that they're able to move on days that they're not working, and that they have enough friends or family willing to help them move."

The student nods and doesn't look offended or ready to argue. He just leans back in his desk, contemplatively.

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In the following weeks, some students become so invested that they start volunteering at the Habitat for Humanity ReStore or the county animal shelter, and they tell me about how restorative it is to have these meaningful community connections. Melody (but not Frank) and Reba even return during the last week of class to watch the students deliver their final projects. Willie, however, quits his job as the director of the animal shelter two weeks before the end of the semester, which I only learn about

when his administrative assistant responds to one of my frantic emails asking for his feedback on the students' drafts.

In this moment of unexpected turnover, nobody else at the animal shelter has the capacity to take over Willie's role in our class project, but the shelter reassures us that they still want the students' brochures at the end of the semester. I spend a day panicking about how we'll move forward without Willie's involvement. But eventually, I realize that this is completely out of my control, and that even though we've lost our point of contact at the shelter, the project must adjust and go on.

During the last week of the semester, students email their brochures to the animal shelter and receive brief "Thank you!" emails from Willie's assistant. While my other classes got detailed revision suggestions from their community partners before they submitted their final drafts, Princess's new friends and I had to work through the uncertainty together, which prompted us to discuss what happens when someone you've been collaborating with abruptly quits a project. During our final class period together, we reflect on our partnership with the animal shelter. I try not to come across as being too disappointed, but I let them know that I was hoping the shelter's staff would have been more involved with the project so that it could have been a reciprocal partnership; I don't mention this, but I know that the shelter would be more likely to use the students' documents if they had offered some revision suggestions for their drafts. However, the students don't seem as troubled by Willie's abrupt departure, and as they pack up their bags to leave the class one final time, they express hopes that Willie is doing well, wherever he is, and that Princess has finally found a home.

Author Bio

Ania Payne, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Writing at Kansas State University. Ania's scholarly agenda focuses on asset-based approaches to community writing partnerships in the English courses that she teaches. She also develops community writing programs with nonprofit partners and examines community storytelling as a mode of inquiry.