

Incorporating Sustainability Projects into Business and Technical Writing Classes: A Workshop for Faculty and Project Clients

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Overview

A grant from South Carolina Sustainable Universities Initiative supported the launch of a Client-Based Program in Clemson University English Department business and technical writing classes. In spring 2003, the program matched eleven writing classes with sustainability-related writing projects requested by campus and community clients. A workshop in November 2002 brought together the writing faculty and the clients, allowing them to learn about each others' needs and about sustainability, and to plan the integration of the projects into the classes. By the end of the spring 2003 semester, the eleven classes had produced 192 deliverables, ranging from posters to lengthy reports to web sites. Response to the program from teachers, clients, and students has been overwhelmingly positive, and the program will continue in 2003-4 thanks to continued SUI funding.

Program Outcomes

Eleven sections of English 304 (Business Writing) and English 314 (Technical Writing) participated in the new Client-Based Program in Spring 2003. Business Writing and Technical Writing are required by many majors at Clemson University, and students in other majors use them to fulfill the University's writing requirement. Majors represented in the classes primarily include fields in agriculture, the sciences, engineering, and business. The courses are intended to prepare students for the types of writing tasks they will encounter in the workplace.

Six faculty, six clients, and about 260 students were involved (see table, below). All of the faculty and clients attended the November 11, 2003 workshop that launched the program.

Faculty	Client	Classes	Overall Goals of Deliverables
Megan Black	Calhoun Field Labs (Geoff Zehnder)	Three Technical Writing	Report and promote the sustainable agriculture research at the field labs
Teddi Fishman	Clemson Dining Services (David Raiger)	Two Technical Writing	Reduce waste and increase recycling associated with on-campus dining
Morgan Gresham	Clemson Elementary School (Gina McLellan)	One Technical Writing	Facilitate maintenance of outdoor learning environments
Renee Love	Clemson Farmers Market (Peter Skewes)	Two Business Writing	Attract customers to the new farmers market and promote products to be sold there
Chantelle MacPhee	Clemson Housing Services (Gary Gaulin and Donna London)	Two Technical Writing	Recommend "green" designs for new dorms, and raise environmental awareness among resident students
Michael Neal	Code Elementary School (Wilene Cohen and Andrew Inabinet)	One Technical Writing	Raise funds for the development of outdoor learning environments

The eleven classes that participated in the program in Spring 2003 produced 192 deliverables for the clients. Copies of a selection of the deliverables are included with this report. The deliverables represent a wide range of written documents:

- 66 poster signs
- 43 flyers and brochures
- 22 instruction manuals
- 18 white papers and reports
- 14 poster presentations
- 6 radio, TV, and print ads
- 5 web sites
- 2 PowerPoint presentations
- 16 letters, forms, logos and other materials

The written products that the students produced for the clients will advance the clients' goals to improve the environmental sustainability and awareness of the Clemson campus and community. In addition to these tangible products, the projects also led to significant changes in the students' own environmental awareness. Teachers of the classes report that students:

- changed their habits to become more sustainable by reducing their use of clothes dryers, printing drafts of their documents on recycled paper, making efforts to recycle glass and plastic products, and so forth
- became more aware of the volume of waste on campus and the costs of disposing of it
- began to understand the complexity of environmental policies and practices
- saw themselves as agents of change in the university and community.

The students were clearly engaged in learning about both the environmental issues and the writing skills that they needed to understand in order to complete their projects. The teachers felt that their students were more motivated to learn writing skills because they wanted to complete effective deliverables. The teachers of the classes said their students were "excited about the projects," "worked hard to meet every deadline," "took on more responsibility for their learning," "wrote much better than students in previous semesters," and "moved way ahead of where I envisioned them to be on such large projects." In short, one teacher said, "The class atmosphere was exciting and a joy to come into every Tuesday and Thursday."

The projects that produced these benefits were launched by a workshop on November 11, 2002 that brought together the writing faculty and the clients. Prior to the workshop, we had identified and held discussions with the clients and teachers, and then matched those participants based on their needs. The workshop provided an important opportunity for the clients and teachers to meet, learn, and plan. The workshop began with an introduction to sustainability definitions, issues, and information resources, presented by SUI representatives. This introduction helped the teachers and clients understand basic sustainability principles, their importance to the world, and their relevance to the writing projects that would be used in the classes. Next, the teachers attended a session on integrating client-based projects into writing courses, presented by Dr. Smith. The session provided guidance on developing a syllabus, maintaining coverage of required course content, teaching collaboration skills and other skills especially necessary to project work, working with clients, and helping students work with clients. An extensive set of teaching materials was provided to the teachers to assist them in planning their courses. Meanwhile, the clients attended a session on working with teachers and students, presented by Professor Haque. This session included guidance on working within the constraints of the semester schedule, communicating expectations and needs, helping students find information without spending too much time and energy on the process, and giving feedback on student work. The workshop concluded with one-on-one meeting time for teacher-client pairs. The pairs used this time to discuss goals and expectations for the projects and to begin planning the integration of the projects into the courses. We facilitated these discussions as needed. The teachers' and clients' anonymous assessments of the workshop indicate that the workshop prepared and motivated them to take action:

- "I feel excitement and optimism from having met the teacher and knowing along with the students we will be a team working to make our project a reality."

- “I arrived neutral about the possibilities and left very excited! You did a great job matching me (client) to my teacher. I believe in the value of service learning. This workshop made it easier to force myself to move to the next level and actually do what I believe.”
- “I look forward to, I hope, a long working relationship. Thanks for having the workshop and including me.”
- “The presentation on sustainability was most useful, as was meeting with the teacher assigned to my project and meeting with other clients interested in sustainability.”
- “The examples were really inspiring and encouraging. Wonderful to hear about various projects going forward on campus.”
- “Honestly, I found this entire day to be one of the most useful workshops I’ve attended. All of the information was relevant and the sessions were well-timed. I feel much more prepared and excited to take on this project after today. Thanks!”
- “I found the packet of teaching materials incredibly thorough. I know I will use it in the future.”

Dissemination

The first year of the Client-Based Program has produced not only the deliverables for the client, but also a substantial body of teaching and programmatic materials as well as a set of presentations that can be used to encourage faculty in other departments and universities to develop similar programs.

In addition to the large binder of teaching materials developed for the workshop, the program now benefits from a client recruiting packet that includes a booklet about how the program works as well as samples of deliverables produced by students.

The faculty involved in the Spring 2003 program also created a PowerPoint presentation about the spring projects. All six faculty, together with one student from each faculty member’s classes, delivered this presentation collaboratively at the April 2003 meeting of the Corporate Advisory Board of the Pearce Center for Professional Communication at Clemson and at the April 2003 campus-wide Communication Across the Curriculum event at Clemson.

Dr. Smith and Prof. Haque are also disseminating ideas from this program to the national academic community. Dr. Smith presented her strategies for the management of client-based projects in June 2002 at the national Writing Program Administrators Conference in Park City, Utah. The presentation was titled “Managing Teacher-Client Relations in Client-Based Projects.” In September 2003, Dr. Smith and Prof. Haque will present a paper titled “Learning from and With the Campus: Incorporating Sustainability Projects into Business and Technical Writing Classes” at the September 2003 Greening of the Campus Conference in Muncie, Indiana.

Continuation of the Program

Thanks to continued funding from SUI, this program will continue in 2003-4. We will again offer a workshop in November, and projects will be integrated into spring classes. We hope to increase slightly the number of classes involved in the program in the spring, and we expect that some returning faculty will include client-based projects in their fall classes as well. To date, about 20 potential clients have been in touch requesting information about the program, so we expect our client base to grow.