

*Grant Writing for the Community:
Building Better Citizens in the Professional Writing Classroom*

In the fight for the future of the humanities, can teaching grant writing help? If that question sounds odd, it shouldn't: the very title of Martha Nussbaum's defense of the humanities, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, suggests a strong tie between civic engagement, the humanities, and the nonprofit world.¹ In this article, I demonstrate how my "Fundamentals of Grant Writing" class gave my students not only professional grant writing experience, but also engaged them deeply in the local community and the wider world—making them better professionals and better citizens.

Collaborative Learning and Civic Engagement

Drawing on fifteen years of experience in the national and international nonprofit world, I recently designed "Fundamentals of Grant Writing" for the English Department at SUNY Plattsburgh, a four-year public liberal arts college in northern New York with 6,350 students from across New York State and the surrounding areas. The first class of its kind to be offered by the department, it enrolled 14 students in Spring 2014, from majors including English (Writing Arts, ELA, and Literature), Sociology, Studio Art, Art History (Museum Studies Minors), and Spanish. A mixture of traditional, non-traditional, and first generation college students, the class as a whole was committed to gaining marketable skills that could help them navigate an increasingly competitive job market. While I knew that students should gain professional grant writing experience and knowledge of the nonprofit development field, I also wanted to create a classroom that stressed collaborative learning, since working with peers is the first step in engaging the outside world. Collaboration is essential to authentic learning; it is also what professionals do. As Amanda Moore McBride and Eric Mlyn note in "Civic Engagement and Higher Education at a Crossroads,"

Those students who work in groups on problem-solving tasks with real-world import, either through a class or community service project, are more likely than those who do not learn in this way to work well in groups, to engage with those who are different from themselves, and to apply what they learn in the classroom to real world settings.²

From the outset, I told my students to consider this class as they would a professional internship. They were to keep abreast of nonprofit development and world philanthropy news; complete real projects and meet deadlines with local organizations; write collaboratively in a group and make edits and revisions; interact with local professionals; and make presentations to the class. Student engagement inside and outside of the classroom occurred naturally in this environment and students gained preparation for the workplace. As one student noted in the course opinion survey, “Loved that this class was taught as if it were a professional internship. I felt that the way the class was designed was a great learning experience.”

Making students accountable to one another helps the class then turn outward to engage with the community and the wider world. Civic engagement, according to Thomas Ehrlich, means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.³

Of course, there are many ways to incorporate civic engagement in the classroom. In my class, peer group collaboration to foster local connections was key to putting student learning into action. Students became more engaged citizens in the local and larger community, more

engaged in the course material, and even benefitted professionally from connections made during the course.

Engagement with the Larger Community

The class met once a week for a two hour and forty-five minute session—conducive to a professionally-oriented, collaborative environment. At the start of each class, students gathered together to present news from the world of philanthropy and nonprofit development that sparked their interest. This activity mimicked a professional staff meeting. Students signed up for free subscriptions to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* and *Philanthropy News Digest* to give them the latest news in the field. They also became members of GrantStation.com, a premier website “dedicated to creating a civil society by assisting the nonprofit sector” with funding sources, news, and educational resources.⁴ My early negotiations with GrantStation led to an interesting kind of beta test: the company agreed to offer free memberships for my students to assess its use for the first time in an undergraduate setting. Upon completion of the course, I wrote an evaluation of the class for the company; as a result, they agreed to offer my future students steep discounts and even reduced yearly subscriptions to help those pursuing a career in grant writing.

Drawing on these resources, students presented on different topics each week: from new Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to high profile philanthropists, from noteworthy grant awards to nonprofit organizations and funding scandals. Students became familiar with a range of funding in different fields, including health, science, education, and the arts nationally and internationally. They also learned about funding trends and terms. One student—with plans to attend the University of Kansas for graduate school in diabetes education—presented each week on new findings in diabetes research and the Kansas funding environment. Students knew that they would be assessed based on their demonstrated investment and depth of their research;

however, depth was never a problem once students found their passion projects, as their presentations often went too long because they brought in so much material. Through their research students gained an awareness of the national and global community in their fields; this is the kind of knowledge that will accompany them on their career paths.

In terms of working with grants, students read real grant applications from a host of nonprofit organizations locally and from around the country in diverse fields. Not only did this help them learn about the tone and style of an application, but it also acquainted them with many groups working to solve local and national problems. In addition, early in the semester students wrote an organizational history statement of a nonprofit organization of their choice. Some of their choices became their final projects and many students actually reached out to make contact with their organizations. Students wrote statements for an afterschool learning program, museums, galleries, organic farming projects, a prison-writing program, an animal sanctuary, a library, and a community dog park. Working in pairs, students edited each other's statements: this exposed them to a different writing style, and they also learned interests outside of their own. Although peer editing obviously can open up issues of ownership, this problem was avoided because of the professional and collaborative environment set up at the outset of the class, not to mention the technical nature of their writing; they were writing for a specific audience and using specific forms, training together as members in the "professional discourse community" of the nonprofit world.⁵ Students said they looked forward to working together in class. As Nussbaum notes, students must learn that "We live in an interdependent world, where some of our most pressing problems can be solved only by dialogue among different groups."⁶ Outlining and solving civic problems was at the heart of our class work in "Fundamentals of Grant Writing."

Engagement with the Local Community: The City of Plattsburgh

In addition to working nationally and internationally in the field of nonprofit development, I also work with local organizations; therefore, I had the resources to connect students to the Plattsburgh community, which I've learned much about in my grant research for Mountain Lake PBS and other local organizations. Uniquely situated on Lake Champlain and the Saranac River, and in close proximity to Montreal, the Adirondacks, and Vermont, Plattsburgh is ranked fourth in economic potential among all micropolitan cities in North and South America by *fDi Magazine* ("foreign direct investment"), published by the *Financial Times* in London.⁷ The county seat for Clinton County and serving as the cultural, retail, and recreational hub for the two contiguous counties, Franklin and Essex, Plattsburgh once hosted one of the nation's largest Air Force bases, which closed in 1995. Since then the city has been working hard to reestablish itself as a vibrant rural city and bustling college town; it is a place, I reminded my students, ready for creative, collaborative problem solving.

As the SUNY Plattsburgh Campus Plan 2018 acknowledges, in order for students to have a more enriching college experience, they need to connect with the community outside of school. It turned out that some of my students had never ventured to downtown Plattsburgh and had no idea about its rich history and cultural endeavors. Unfortunately, this is not unusual for many of the students here. To bridge this divide, the college has instituted a new Center for Public Service. To familiarize my students with the region, I had them read the North Country Regional Economic Development Council's Strategic Plan and the Clinton County Master Destination Plan.

An early assignment had students use this research and their own fieldwork to write Statements of Need for the City of Plattsburgh. Students took this assignment very seriously

because a few members of City Council would be reading their statements. Through this task students began to feel a greater investment in Plattsburgh. Not surprisingly, many Statements of Need focused on connecting the college more to the community. Examples included the need for the Student Association Shuttle to make a stop downtown, the creation of an off-leash dog park, murals, a sculpture park, an artist residency program, a film major at the college with a local film festival, a community center, a community and college arts calendar, and incentives for more businesses downtown. Here's an excerpt from one Statement of Need by Geralyn Adams (B.A., Writing Arts '14):

Bridging the gap between SUNY Plattsburgh students and the Plattsburgh community is important—if students feel they are a valued part of the community, they will be more likely to stay in Plattsburgh after they graduate. This will increase the number of young professionals in Plattsburgh, and in turn will boost the local economy with businesses and patronage. The community and the students both have things to offer one another and will benefit from a stronger relationship. The *SUNY's Economic Impact on NYS* study found that SUNY schools “had a minimum economic impact of \$19.8 billion in 2008-09.” Further, the *2010-11 Economic Impact of SUNY Plattsburgh* study found the following: “students contributed more than \$47 million in direct expenditures to the region’s overall economy through spending, including housing (off-campus), food, transportation and other personal expenses.” It is difficult to say how much of this spending went to the small businesses downtown, but it is not amiss to infer that much of the money was spent at franchise stores uptown (Walmart, Target, Price Chopper, etc.). One thing that can be done to boost both social and economic ties between students and

the Plattsburgh community is to add a Student Association (SA) shuttle route that makes stops at downtown destinations.

To assess these statements, I kept an eye on writing as well as research. The example above demonstrates a clear need and offers a solution backed up by a close reading of the Impact Study. I shared many of my students' Statements of Need with stakeholders in the community and am proud to say that many of their ideas have been put into action. The SA shuttle will now consider a stop downtown for special events. Another student contacted the City directly to talk about improving the local dog park, and organizations are writing grants for more public art downtown. Experiencing successful real-world implications of their work helped students place more value on the work done in the classroom when they saw that what they produced could have effects outside the classroom. This project helped to achieve two of the major learning outcomes of the class, which included fostering a sense of professionalism in their work and having students become responsible, contributing members of the community.

Throughout the course, students also worked with three local nonprofit organizations. Half the class completed prospect research and a grant deadline calendar for the Imaginarium Children's Museum and the other half did the same for the Childcare Coordinating Council of the North Country. As a result, students learned how to research grants and organize a funding calendar, while helping two small nonprofits in the community find more funding opportunities.

Finally, a major project of the course involved writing a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant for Mountain Lake PBS (MLPBS). The grant was a "NEH Media Project: Production Grant" for an upcoming documentary on the landscape artist Thomas Cole. MLPBS Producer (Dan Swinton) and Director of Fundraising & Business Development (Janine Scherline) visited the class to talk about the documentary. These professionals asked the

students to do their own research on the subject matter and even come up with a title for the film, which is now in a developmental stage. I divided the class into groups of two; each group was responsible for two to three sections of the grant application. MLPBS worked with the class to provide information for their sections but students had to do much of the groundwork themselves. For example, some students read sample NEH documentary grants for inspiration, while other students researched humanities scholars appropriate for the documentary, and still others searched for any previous film work done on Thomas Cole. The lesson was invaluable: students saw how much legwork actually goes into a real grant application. Putting together a grant that complies with the funder's guidelines and interests is no small task. Aided by Google Docs, students gained the experience of working with different personalities and approaches to writing, as one must in a professional setting. By the end of the NEH grant, students were amazed at the large application they had put together. I monitored the quality of their work on this assignment all the way from their first drafts to revisions, including the quality of editorial suggestions they made for other sections, and their level of commitment to working with their partners. Again, I was impressed by their work, as was MLPBS.

Experts in the Classroom

In addition to Dan Swinton and Janine Scherline from MLPBS, I brought many other guest speakers to the class to give the students different perspectives on the field of grant writing and nonprofit development. Speakers included SUNY Plattsburgh President John Ettling, who has experience serving on NEH panels; Amy Bonn, a nonprofit consultant; and Leigh Mundy, who led the capital campaign to restore the historic Strand Theatre in Plattsburgh. Students even visited the Strand to attend the local Vision2Action "Spring Forward" event, a community update looking at the arts, recreation, education, and transportation in the greater Plattsburgh

region. Meeting with and asking questions of real world professionals gave students the chance to see how the skills they learned in class transferred to the professional workplace. A few of the speakers gave the students their contact information to help them post-graduation. Having guest speakers in the class helped students achieve the specific learning outcomes of preparing them for a professional career and gaining an awareness of the profession.

Evaluation of the Civic Engagement Aspect of the Classroom

For their final, students selected a nonprofit—or even themselves as individuals—and had to outline a work plan, research funding opportunities, create a deadline calendar, write a letter of inquiry and full grant application, and present their work to the class. In most cases, students reached out to their organizations and received positive responses. One student created his own afterschool tutoring program and was advised by a former afterschool program that he attended. A Studio Art student created the business plan for a gallery she will start after college. Another student who will attend Hunter College for graduate school researched a leadership organization for professional women in the arts (based in Brooklyn) and thus made important personal contacts in the art world. Finally, one student landed a freelance grant writing job by working with her organization. Having engaged with the local and global community throughout the course, students were able to create final projects that helped prepare them for their post-graduate education and careers.

Conclusion

Collaborative learning releases what Nussbaum calls the “spirit” of the humanities, by which she means “daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in.”⁸ That spirit of imagination, empathy, and understanding in the face of complexity should guide our teaching in

the humanities, as I believe it did mine in “Fundamentals of Grant Writing.” Importantly, the course became truly student-directed as students learned by doing. As a trained actress, I even thought of the class as a working ensemble of sorts, working together to address community needs. Because they were civically engaged, students did not mind the challenge of the eight writing assignments and peer collaboration, and the daunting task of the NEH grant. As one student wrote, “I spent a significant amount of time on the grant project assignments. I found these assignments very engaging and interesting.” Another student wrote, “I liked working on these assignments and didn’t treat them like busy work.” The students viewed the work differently because they saw themselves as professionals taking on community problems. It is my hope that they also see themselves now as better citizens.

¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2010).

² Amanda Moore McBride and Eric Mlyn, “Civic Engagement and Higher Education at a Crossroads” *The Huffington Post Blog*, Nov. 5, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-moore-mcbride/civic-engagement-and-higher-education_b_4218389.html (accessed May 3, 2014).

³ Thomas Ehrlich, “Introduction,” in *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, ed. Thomas Ehrlich (Phoenix: The American Council on Education and The Oryx Press, 2000): xxi-xliii.

⁴ Mission Statement of GrantStation, <http://www.grantstation.com/public/about.asp> (accessed July 6, 2014).

⁵ Edith Babin and Kimberly Harrison, *Contemporary Composition Studies: A Guide to Theorists and Terms* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 258.

⁶ Scott Horton, "Not for Profit: Six Questions for Martha Nussbaum," *Harper's Magazine Blog*, June 1, 2010, http://harpers.org/blog/2010/06/_not-for-profit_-six-questions-for-martha-nussbaum/6-questions-for-nussbaum (accessed May 15, 2014).

⁷ Dan Heath, "Plattsburgh's Economic Potential Ranks High," *Press Republican*, April 26, 2013, http://www.pressrepublican.com/0100_news/x701036587/Plattsburghs-economic-potential-ranks-high (accessed May 20, 2014).

⁸ Nussbaum, *Not For Profit*, 7.

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