

**Session Description:** *Transforming the Technical Writing Curriculum for Social Innovation.* This workshop will teach students, faculty service learning directors, staff, and community administrators how the technical writing classroom has become a dynamic site for social innovation and community engagement. This workshop will discuss the origins of creating a writing curriculum based upon students 'lifework' aspirations and show how grouping students by their professional/technical fields and encouraging them to do research and community outreach activities will result in new non-profit ideas, grant proposals, and non-profit engagement. Workshop participants will have the opportunity to do a hands-on activity to create a program that will generate solutions to problems through non-profit development as part of the technical writing curriculum. **Conference Presenter:** Jennifer Johnston, Chemeketa Community College.

**Background:** Twenty-two years ago I decided that I wanted to create an oral history and writing program that would encourage people to express their dreams, ideas, visions, and opinions about self and society through writing, storytelling, and social innovation. My graduate program in interdisciplinary communication studies at the University of Oregon was devoted to blending creative storytelling, life narrative, and public policy critique in a teaching format so students could write about personal empowerment and societal change. The culmination of this work was my thesis entitled, *Farm Women's Sentiments Towards Recognition of Their Work: Implications and Origins in Public Policy* (1991). I recorded my research and observations about the ways that even the most well meaning public policy initiatives can appear intrusive or malicious to women who have worked outside of the wage economy. This study, and

what it revealed about the complex relationship of self and professional identity, was the beginning of my quest to uncover how people find meaning in their life work.

The method that I used to facilitate these life discussions was the creative writing workshop setting. For my thesis research, I visited the homes of farm women and we had ‘life work meetings’ (based on the writings of Nancy Fraser and Jurgen Habermas about ‘motherwork’ and ‘system and lifeworld’). Over coffee and cake, farm women would discuss their lives, their priorities, and their views about the world in a series of brainstorming sessions. From that brainstorming, they would construct life narratives and talk about the process of creating a community and a world view through work on the farm. Not only did they examine their life stories and public policy in these settings, their brainstorming allowed me to observe how public policy intersects with life history, so I could find a way to describe the interaction between private lives and public policy.

I continued my post-graduate work in women’s stories and worked with Elizabeth Fox Genovese, Jean Friedman, and others to record the oral histories of farm women who had been sharecroppers or the grandchildren of slaves. I then taught writing to non-traditional students, studied language pedagogy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and worked in adult ‘bridge’ programs in higher education helping my students articulate their professional and personal experiences as they laid the foundation to build new academic goals and followed their aspirations to pursue their life work. Meanwhile, I took courses at the Foundation Center in Washington, DC to strengthen my grant writing skills, so I could teach students to write the grants and proposals they might need to support their work if they chose to start non-profit organizations.

During my seven years at American University and at Johns Hopkins University, my students wrote compelling personal essays, read major modern essayists, and created innovative social programs. At American University, students were encouraged in the Advanced Placement for Experiential Learning program (APEL) to use hardship experiences as the foundation for essays explaining why they were returning to higher education to pursue careers in social work, criminal justice, education, counseling, or the arts. Confessional writing paired with professional aspirations ensured that students matched their academic goals to their lifework.

At the Johns Hopkins School of Professional Studies in Business and Education, my Senior Project students were already involved in international relief projects or professional work in business or architecture. This gave me the opportunity to send students 'into the field' to conduct research in program building. If my students were interested in business investment in Poland, or in developing women's businesses in South Korea, or in bringing nursing education to the Palestinian territories, they researched non-profit centers dedicated to those very programs in the Washington, DC area and interviewed program staff to get information about the ways such programs were funded and developed. Their final research project was a business blueprint and a researched plan to bring their business venture into reality.

After re-locating to Oregon, I have heard that my former students at American University and Johns Hopkins continued to follow their dreams, build programs, (one student even created an adult literacy center in North Carolina), and others have pursued international projects based upon the work they began in these classes.

When I embarked on teaching technical writing at Chemeketa Community College in 2009, I based my curriculum on this previous experience and scholarship. I required students to define themselves through resumes and work histories that adequately detailed the work they had done in the past. While completing work on their resumes, they also discussed in class their present course of studies and joined with other class members who shared their professional interests. This quickly led to brainstorming life goals together, and they discussed the challenges in their professions and their dreams for the future. Then they formed workgroups to create mock non-profit businesses based on their mission statements and supported by business promotional materials they learned how to write in class. This culminated in the students finding and interviewing similar non-profits in the community and creating a non-profit project that would be supported by funds from a proposal they wrote to an appropriate funder.

Through this technical writing curriculum, we created classroom communities. Together students nourished dreams and became involved in self directed learning that was authentic and produced quality writing because the writing engaged prior knowledge and technical expertise in the students' own fields of research and study.

### **The Activity**

Although we will not have time to go through all of the brainstorming and life work reflection sessions of a 10 week class, in 1 hour we can go through the activity of finding an interest area, creating a writing community, and brainstorming ways to arrive at socially innovative solutions to your selected problem.

I. Interest Area: I am going to send around a number of laminated Velcro tags in a bag. Everyone should reach into the bag and pull out one of the tags. You have the opportunity to select one of the following:

- a. Education
- b. Arts
- c. Clean Energy
- d. Health and Human Services
- e. Animals
- f. Veterans and/or Incarcerated

Once everyone has chosen an interest area out of the grab bag, you will get into one of your 6 groups. You will do some brief introductions and write your names down on a sheet of paper and perhaps (if there is time) mention something about the topic that concerns you. Each group will receive a felt covered board.

II. Mission Slogan: The group will get a bag of possible business names with a mission slogan to match your interest group. One person (selected by rolling dice) will select a mission out of the bag. For example, Health and Human Services could reach into their 'slogan' bag and pick a slogan such as "Foodworks – Improving Nutrition for Low Income Kids."

III. Sample Evidence: In a third bag, you will have a number of pieces of evidence that discuss the enormity of a social problem. You might find a piece of evidence detailing the number of obese children in the country, or one that describes the poor quality of school lunches, or another that discusses hunger in America. You will choose the evidence you feel supports the reason your business needs to exist and discuss why the research is important and relevant.

IV. Building the Solution: Now that you have an interest area and a business and relevant research that shows that the problem you want to address is real, you need to have a solution to your problem. Your fourth bag is your tool kit. Pull out the possible tools (you don't have to use any of them) to solve your problem and put these tools together on your felt board. Inside your tool kit you may find:

- a. Transportation and buses
- b. A learning center
- c. An import-export shipping business
- d. An organic farm
- e. Computer Lab
- f. Recording studio
- g. A TV station
- h. Video Camera
- i. A School
- j. A staff of 10 people

Assemble your plan for your business on your felt board and present it to the class. Congratulations, you've just built the foundation of your business and you're ready to start researching and writing about how you are going to solve one of your community's problems!