

Shelton Weech | Teaching Philosophy

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As someone who spent several years in a corporate job, I have experienced firsthand the need for employees with strong communication skills. I seek to foster those skills in my students, who are preparing to enter the workforce. My aim has always been to help **all students** who take my classes leave with the resources and skills they need to adapt to different real-world communication situations. To create a classroom environment that helps students develop these resources and skills, I emphasize two areas: first, the importance of focusing writing around **audiences or users**; and second, connection to the larger **communities** of which students are part, including the immediate classroom community. In emphasizing these areas, I want my students to recognize real-world potential in classroom communication situations.

User-Centered Communication

I always stress that students need to think from an audience- or user-centered perspective. Whether those audiences are professors, future employers, or users of technical documents, learning to identify and write for those audiences is a skill that students can take with them beyond the classroom to succeed in future writing. For example, in my Technical Writing class, students identify potential users of technical documents from the immediate community who will be impacted by the construction of an amusement park in that community. Students research the community and the market, and from that research they build sample user personas. I ask students to create profiles, to find or generate pictures online so that they can put faces to the personas they develop, and to think less in terms of generalities and more in terms of specific characteristics, values, needs, and backgrounds of people who may encounter their work. In this way, they can better tailor their communication to meet the end-users' needs.

A user-centered focus also provides a framework by which I can discuss diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. When students are communicating, they need to think of all of the potential individuals who could encounter that communication. When we discuss data, we discuss how data visualizations can be made ethically, and how to communicate about data in ways that do not erase often-underrepresented groups. We discuss choosing images for PowerPoint presentations that represent people from different backgrounds and cultures, and I actively seek to include similar representation in the PowerPoint presentations I build for my courses. I build accessibility into my documents and teach my students how to do the same. By helping my students think of audiences and users as real people, I am reinforcing the fact that there are real-world consequences to the writing that they do and that recognizing how to be inclusive and representative will strengthen their communication skills and help them succeed.

Community

My emphasis on an audience-centered focus stems from the importance community has in my life, a value that I strive to foster in my students. Their community includes the university, local neighborhoods, cities, countries, and even digital communities. My assignments require students to look at problems outside of the classroom and ask them to simulate writing for members of communities to help solve those problems. In my online Business Writing course, I asked students to find a local small business or nonprofit and write a white paper for that business. Their aim was to identify strategies by which the business could strengthen its community presence via social media by researching how other similar businesses in the

community do the same. For me, the key to this assignment was its **local** context, which helped students think about their place in and their connections to the community. And students delivered: they produced recommendation reports for local coffee houses, Chinese restaurants, and nonprofits that took into account local populations and how these organizations could better reach them via their digital communications.

I believe that a sense of community can start within the classroom, where I work to build an environment in which students feel comfortable sharing and working with each other. In my Business Writing course, I started building a classroom community at the very beginning of the semester with a “coat of arms” activity. This activity asked students to create a medieval-style coat of arms that detailed their past experiences, accomplishments, talents, and strengths. Students draw this coat of arms, and then they share it with the class. This activity includes a low-stakes oral presentation that elicits positive feedback from classmates, and it serves as a basis for students as they begin to build their professional personas with resumes, cover letters, and other job documents. At the same time, students get to know each other and can offer stronger feedback and collaborate more fully through the course of the semester.

A stronger classroom community leads to stronger collaborations among students, and vice versa. As they did their market research on local businesses, I required my Multimedia Writing students to reach out to individuals at the organizations they were researching and conduct interviews. The primary research conducted for this project was in-depth enough to require the participation of multiple group members, and thus required a detailed team infrastructure to accomplish it. To build this team infrastructure and improve team collaboration, I asked the teams to submit team charters, schedules, division of tasks, and conflict resolution plans. That said, I believe in letting students exercise problem-solving skills within their teams, and I regularly conference with them to clarify tasks and offer feedback as needed. During this project, I saw groups work together, take responsibility, and step out of their comfort zone. Team projects in college courses can often be painful, but because of my focus on team infrastructure, conflicts were reduced and responsibilities were equitably assigned. Students expressed enthusiasm for the project and for their teams, and the deliverables that they put together were thorough and thoughtful examinations of organizations and their websites.

Finally, if I am asking students to participate in a classroom community, I believe it is important that I do not exempt myself. While the realities of teaching and grading will always create a hierarchy and separation between my students and me, I try to make it clear that I am still part of their community. When we do the coat of arms activity, I create one alongside them. When I ask students to share their work in class, I share work of my own. Furthermore, I welcome feedback on my work. In my Business Writing course, I shared my resume with students. I got enough feedback to go back and do another revision of it, even though I had been using it (somewhat successfully) for years.

By emphasizing a user-centered approach to communication, fostering a sense of community, and encouraging active collaboration, I not only model effective and equitable communication within the classroom, but I also give students skills that they can take beyond the classroom and into their workplaces, communities, and nations.