Principles and Best Practices for Community-Engaged Writing at Conestoga

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This document describes principles and best practices for conducting community-engaged writing projects at Conestoga. It provides resources for faculty, students, and partners involved in curricular and co-curricular community-engaged writing activities.

Research for this guide was completed by a working group of faculty and students supported by the Conestoga Community-Engaged Writing Initiative, and it was initially funded by a Conestoga New and Emerging Research Grant.

Our conclusions and recommendations are based on literature reviews and consultations with Conestoga students and with local organizations working in community-engaged scholarship, pedagogy, and arts.

This is a living document that will continue to evolve to reflect the needs of Conestoga faculty, students, and the greater community.

How We Define Community-Engaged Writing

The Conestoga Community-Engaged Writing Initiative (CCEWI) defines community-engaged writing as any project that leverages writing about the community, for the community, or with the community (Deans, 2000) in support of our mission statement and goals.

CCEWI aims to foster relationships between Conestoga and the greater community through collaborative student writing projects that focus on **equity, access, and empathy**:

- *To develop community-engaged writing curriculum in support of faculty, students, and community partners*
- *To promote work-integrated and experiential learning projects for our students*
- *To contribute ethical solutions to community problems through promoting writing and literacy as tools for public awareness, expression, and dialogue*

Benefits of Community-Engaged Writing

Research shows that community-engaged writing projects benefit students, faculty, and their communities.

When we provide **students** with authentic writing assessments and projects, they can...
- See writing as a purposeful product, not just a test of skill (Young & Morgan, 2020)
- Understand audience and purpose as motivating factors throughout the writing and revision process (Young & Morgan, 2020)
- Strengthen their understandings of foundational concepts such as purpose and context (Young & Morgan, 2020)
- Build empathy by considering power, positionality, privilege (Knight, 2022)
- Acknowledge and honour the realities in their own communities (Haddix et al., 2015)
- Reflect "on action" and "in action" (Wells, 2016)

- Students who engage in community-based projects make meaningful connections between theory and practice, and develop problem-solving and leadership skills, by exploring the nature of ethical and responsible citizenship in their classes. These students have an advantage in the workplace (Bonner Foundation Curriculum Workshop #10, n.d.).
- Professors at Conestoga who do community-engaged work report that their students create portfolio-ready pieces for the job market and develop stronger collaboration and planning skills.

For **faculty,** community-engaged writing projects have the potential to increase satisfaction with student learning and inspire connections and support for research (Eyler et al., 2001, p. 7).

- Incorporating community-engaged work in the classroom can...
  - Energize faculty by enhancing interdisciplinary connections, creating foundations for innovative partnerships, and introducing new intellectual perspectives
  - Demonstrate the foundation of knowledge application in communication curriculum
  - Ensure that curriculum remains current
  - Foster authentic civic engagement
    (Bonner Foundation Curriculum Workshop #10, n.d.)

In turn, **partners in our communities** benefit from...
- A greater pool of resources to identify local priorities and concerns, address local issues, and create local solutions to local challenges (Bonner Foundation Curriculum Workshop #10, n.d.)
- Enhanced relationships with colleges and universities (Eyler et al., 2001)
- Access to college resources
- Help reaching organizational goals in the community (Clarke, 2000)
- Additional capacity to impact the community and serve clients (Clarke, 2000; Driscoll et al., 1996)

Engaging Partners

How to choose projects/partners: Questions to Consider

- Who are the people in our community whose voices need to be heard?
- What specific deliverables can our students offer (could be production oriented, research oriented, or training oriented – see Knight, 2022)?
- What needs do our students have that CEW might meet?
- What are the potential institutional benefits of proposed partnerships?

- The needs, goals, and priorities of community partners/organizations can and should be the driver here (they can bring projects to us); the visibility of CCEWI will be key; it's important to leverage existing networks, where possible
- Expectations should be clear from the start: partners must understand and support the course/assessment(s), learning outcomes, semester timeline, student capabilities, and desired impacts
- Learning goals and community goals need to align: the student needs and the partner needs must be equally met (see Young & Morgan, 2020)
- Reciprocity and relationship-building are key factors, re: meaningful collaboration; partners should ideally be viewed as co-educators and/or co-creators
- Community partnerships should be both place-based (i.e. local) and asset-based (i.e. focused on community strengths rather than deficits); mutually beneficial (for the students, the college, and the community organization); democratic; sustainable; and ideally geared toward capacity-building (see Bonner Foundation)
- Regular communication and ongoing feedback are key to maintaining community partnerships; both parties must be accountable

Engaging Students

- Service learning/experiential learning has various positive outcomes for students: personal, social, academic, professional, institutional (Eyler et al., 2001)
- Experiential learning allows students to start their own networks with community partners (it has real value for them, in this sense); this can be a big selling feature, re: professional/career development and employability
- Well-designed CEW projects and partnerships can demonstrate for students how they can have a real-world impact through their written work
- A focus on voice, community, and belonging (rather than or as part of conventional academic work) is appealing for many students

- The emphasis of CEW can be on the empowering nature of having a real audience, of having one's writing do real-world work that matters to the writer and the audience, and of having a voice and a perspective that's valued over standard writing conventions; CEW can also be a practice through which the realities in a student's own community are acknowledged and honoured (Haddix et al., 2015)
- Collective voices (i.e. students working together or students working with community groups) can be used to seek out justice/social change (Wutrz et al., 2022)
- CEW results in better student learning and critical thinking: it enhances student capacity to analyze rhetorical situations (including consideration of audience, purpose, and context) throughout the writing and revision process; and it also enhances student capacity to understand their writing as more than a test of skill (Young & Morgan, 2020)

Support for Faculty

Faculty may face these and other barriers when planning community-engaged writing projects:

- Lack of resources (Eyler et al., 2001)
- Lack of employer incentive or reward (Eyler et al., 2001)
- A perceived disconnect between student writing and communities (Garza, 2012)
- Limited understandings of student capacity to authentically help communities through writing (Garza, 2012)
- Lack of time to create community-engaged writing curriculum (Garza, 2012)

To address these challenges, CCEWI supports these core principles for classroom and co-curricular projects.

- **Service learning is inherently iterative, for both faculty and students, so providing professional development and maintaining vibrant communities of practice is vital.** Part of CCEWI's ongoing role will be to create/facilitate Critical Service Learning/Experiential Learning PD opportunities for faculty: CCEWI aspires to offer faculty CEW learning support in the form of engagement and development seminars.

- **Community partnerships take time and trust.** CCEWI will help connect faculty with community writing needs and facilitating relationships with community partners and offer support for measuring outcomes.

- **Partnerships among faculty, support services, and administration create the foundation for sustained community-engaged writing projects.** CCEWI will work with existing services at the college to support faculty in the development of writing curriculum:

  > *Work-Integrated Learning at Conestoga can include community-based projects and community service-learning course work; these are embedded in course design and include third-party engagement (e.g. community partners); WIL experiences are delivered by both WIL and the academic unit*

  > *Experiential Learning at Conestoga (such as field experience or project-based course work) is still embedded in program or course design but is delivered entirely by the academic unit. See the EL and WIL glossary for details.*

- **Students deserve recognition.** Conestoga's Co-Curricular Recognition Procedure encourages student participation and allows students to profile their contributions. There are many ways to acknowledge and celebrate the writing that students do outside of class, and doing so reinforces students' sense of themselves as writers (Lindenman & Rosinski, 2020). These might include publication on the CCEWI website or other forums.

- **Student work within the community-engaged classroom needs to be fairly and effectively assessed.** Creating appropriate **learning outcomes** is crucial because they can…
  - ✓ Demonstrate the impact of community engagement on student learning
  - ✓ Connect community engagement to the college's larger mandate
  - ✓ Elevate the perception and value of community
  - ✓ Validate the work of the CCEWI as a professional unit that directly impacts teaching and learning (Bonner Faculty Engagement Models, p. 14); see this document, pp. 14+, for sample learning outcomes)

- More than just writing/academics can be assessed. Personal, professional, and/or leadership skills may all come into play as well (depending on the course and the project).

- Sample impact variables for students include not only academic achievement but also broader communication skills, awareness of and involvement with community, commitment to service, career development, self-awareness and personal development, autonomy/independence, sense of ownership, and sensitivity to diversity (Driscoll et al., 1996, p. 68)

- See also the Bonner framework for broader student assessment/learning outcomes: Bonner / Student Development - Goals and Framework (pbworks.com)
  - *Civic engagement (civic agency and civic identity)*
  - *Empathy*
  - *Community building*
  - *Social justice*
  - *Perspective taking*
  - *Diversity competence*
  - *Leadership*
  - *Place-based and issue-based knowledge formation*

- Sample criteria for **effective** experiential learning or critical service learning (adapted from Veronica House, Program for Writing and Rhetoric, U of Colorado Boulder):
  - *It must be integrated into the curriculum (course outline, instructional plan, assessment design)*
  - *It must be directly linked to the course learning outcomes (focusing on analysis, synthesis, and reflection)*
  - *Expectations for community-based work must be clear: the duration, intensity, and/or volume of the work must be sufficient to produce meaningful outcomes*
  - *Students must learn about the potential real-world impact their work could have for the partnering organization (its constituents, its funding, its reputation, etc.)*
  - *Projects and activities must be reciprocal: that is, designed in collaboration with community partners to serve genuine community needs*
  - *There should be assessment of both the learning outcomes and the community partnership itself*

- Sample Community-Engaged Learning Rubric (Bonner)

- Faculty could assess the process rather than – or in addition to – the product through graded reflection pieces; the community partner then also gives a review of how it was to work with the students

- Reflection model for experiential learning: experiencing (how did you respond?), sharing/exchanging (what did you learn?), processing (how did you learn it?), generalizing (why is it important?), applying (what will you do because of it? (see Bonner)

- Effective reflection activities should
  - *clearly link the service experience to course content and learning objectives;*
  - *be structured in terms of descriptions, expectations, and the criteria for assessment;*
  - *occur regularly during the semester;*
  - *allow for feedback and assessment by the instructor; and*
  - *include the opportunity for students to explore, clarify, and alter their personal values (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, as cited in House)*

- Sample reflection questions (for both students and community partners) might include

- *To what extent did the experience meet your expectations?*
  What might have made the experience better?
- *What community needs or requests did your work fulfil?*
  What community needs or requests were not adequately addressed?
- *What changes might you suggest to improve the project?*
  (see Bonner Foundation Workshop)

- **Community-engaged student work beyond the classroom needs to be fairly and effectively assessed.** Co-curricular opportunities at Conestoga must be designed to support students' career readiness in at least one of the competencies provided by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE):
  - *Career and self-development*
  - *Communication*
  - *Critical thinking*
  - *Equity and inclusion*
  - *Leadership*
  - *Professionalism*
  - *Teamwork*
  - *Technology*

- **The impact of community-engaged work is far-reaching.** Partners, communities, faculty, staff, and the college itself can all benefit from meaningful engagement through writing.

  - Community impact outcomes: efficiency/efficacy; scale/reach; leverage (see Bonner)

  - Carnegie Canadian Pilot Cohort values (community engagement classifications): reciprocity, reconciliation, fun, courage, accountability, collaboration, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

  - Capacity development, partnerships, research projects (three areas to gauge the success of CCEWI, borrowed from CESI); tie to Conestoga's own strategic goals

  - Institutional impact variables include the college's role in the community/region, orientation to teaching and learning, resource acquisition, and public profile (Driscoll et al., 1996, p. 69)

  - Criteria for measuring the quality and significance of CEW (Jordan, 2007, as cited in CESI):
    - *Clear Academic and Community Change Goals*
    - *Adequate Preparation in Content Area and Grounding in the Community*
    - *Appropriate Methods: Rigor and Community Engagement*
    - *Significant Results: Impact on the Field and the Community*
    - *Effective Presentation/Dissemination to Academic and Community Audiences*
    - *Reflective Critique: Lessons Learned to Improve the Scholarship and Community Engagement*
    - *Leadership and Personal Contribution*
    - *Consistently Ethical Behavior: Socially Responsible Conduct of Research and Teaching*

  - Community projects should also be evaluated from the perspective of the partnering organization; this can be part of the reflective practice associated with CEW projects (as discussed above)

- Potential variables for measuring the impact of experiential learning projects on community partners include establishing ongoing relationships; raising awareness of experiential learning in general and community-engaged writing in particular; economic and social benefits; new insights about internal operations/activities; and even identifying prospective employees (Driscoll et al., 1996, p. 69)

- There are impact variables for faculty development as well, such as role in community-based teaching, philosophy of teaching and learning, pedagogical approaches, faculty-student interaction, professional development, scholarship, awareness of and involvement with community, and level of volunteerism (Driscoll et al., 1996, p. 68)

- **Learning needs and community needs are equally paramount.** Objectives for projects or assessments can and should be set by both the faculty member and the partnering organization.

Suggested Reading & Resources

Canadian

- Carnegie Community Engagement Classification - Canadian Pilot Cohort
- Centre for Community Based Research (Waterloo)
- Centre for Community Engaged Narrative Arts (McMaster)
- Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (Guelph)
- Revision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice (Guelph)

American

- The Beautiful Social Research Collaborative
- The Bonner Foundation Wiki
- Centre for Community Engagement, Learning, & Leadership (Louisiana)
- Coalition for Community Writing
- House, V. (2015). Community engagement in writing program design and administration. *Writing Program Administration*, *39*(1), 54+. https://link-gale-com.conestoga.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A443131629/AONE?u=conestoga&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=d0ab7596.
- The Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement (Colorado): see especially the "Course Planning" section of this document

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