

Purposeful Partnership:

Code for America Brigades as a Professional Development Network for Technical Writers

By JASMINE R. AMERIN and ERICA M. STONE



Senavio/shutterstock.com

Current Trends in Technical Communication Professional Development

In the December 2018 issue of *Intercom*, Saul Carliner and Yuan Chen reviewed current trends in the professional development of the technical communication industry, as collected in the STC Census. According to this data, the top two “go-to” sources for professional development were blogs and books, while events or even journals and social media trailed far behind. Surprisingly, only 6 percent of census participants reported

attending events (training classes, webinars, conferences, and meetings) to sharpen their skills and understand the shifting trends in the field. Near the end of their review, Carliner and Chen noted their concern for the large percentage of technical communicators who indicated that they do not plan to pursue much professional development in 2019. In this article, we address this disengagement problem by proposing a different kind of professional development based on purposeful partnership and mutual benefit.

The Need for Professional Development

In order to keep up with the evolution of the field, professional development is necessary for both seasoned technical communicators and those just starting out in the industry. When assessing the age groups of technical communicators, the census found that those in the workforce tended to be age 50 or older. In the same vein, the relatively low ratio of technical communicators below the age of 35 raised apprehension regarding the long-term trajectory of the occupation. Consequently, concerns related to professional development now extend past professionals and reach to newcomers. How can the technical communication field appeal to younger generations and inspire more diverse demographics? By exploring the activities through which inexperienced individuals may develop a genuine interest in technical communication and the skills required, we can identify better ways to market the work of technical communicators to newcomers, novice technical writers, and students alike.

The Shortage of Professional Development for Students and Novice Practitioners

Outside of internships or STC chapter meetings and webinars, a novice technical writer or a student majoring in technical writing might be hard-pressed to find a place to learn new technical communication skills. Twenty-three years after Spinuzzi (1996) implored us to introduce students and novice practitioners to the field of technical writing in a setting that isn't epistemic and pseudotransactional, we still don't have a localized community of practitioners working toward a common cause or project in which we can offer the space to practice new skills and learn new genres.

Code for America: An Untapped Professional Development Network for Technical Writers

While STC provides a community for academics and professionals alike to learn new skills and understand shifts in the field, it does not frequently offer opportunities for transactional practice with a specific goal or product in mind. We propose a new network for technical communicators to engage in free, localized, community-focused, professional development: Code for America.

As a start-up, nonprofit organization supporting a network of people committed to making government processes and technologies more accessible, Code for America is an untapped resource for technical writers seeking purposeful professional development opportunities. With a focus on social advocacy and digital innovation for local governments, Code for America's local brigades work on volunteer-proposed projects where technical writers can sharpen their skills as project managers, UX designers, usability testers, content writers, coders, and social media marketers. With additional opportunities to translate

processes and information between coders and subject matter experts, Code for America brigades provide ample opportunity for technical writers to write transactionally and learn the genres of our field (Spinuzzi 1996).

Code for KC: A Brief Case Study

Code for Kansas City, the local Code for America brigade with which our Advanced Technical Writing class partnered for the Spring 2019 semester, works in collaboration with KC Digital Drive, a local 501(c)3 and the umbrella organization for Code for KC, to solve technical problems in the Kansas City, Missouri, area.



Figure 1. Code for KC website homepage where volunteers can review GitHub readme files and learn about in-process and delivered projects.

Some of the applications Code for KC has developed are:

- ▶ CommunityKC, a networking tool designed to connect local civic groups
- ▶ Clear My Record, a semi-automated system for helping low-income residents find and clear their criminal records to increase the chances of being hired for a job or renting an apartment
- ▶ Tagging Tracker, an environmentally friendly tracking initiative that aims to reduce and remove graffiti from public infrastructure

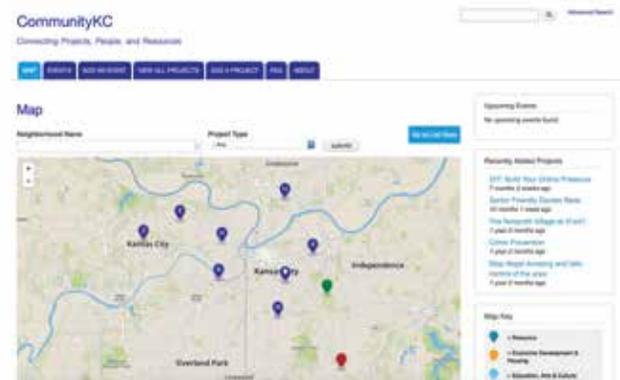


Figure 2. CommunityKC homepage where Kansas City residents can locate projects they may be interested in volunteering for. Organizations are sorted by type, location, and self-described volunteer needs.



Figure 3. Current “Give Stuff” page for Re.Use.Full, which continues to be revised as advanced technical writing students produce the content.

Our Service-Learning Project

Re.Use.Full, one of Code for KC’s most recent, environmentally friendly projects, aims to reduce waste and promote recycling by connecting donors to organizations that have a use for the reusable items. As of January 2019, Re.Use.Full was still being conceptualized, which made it the perfect opportunity for a community-focused, service-learning project—particularly for an asynchronous, online class where face-to-face contact would be limited to scheduled Zoom meetings and coffee meetups.

Avoiding Hyperpragmatism in Service Learning

In addition to being designed to meet the rhetorical situation of an asynchronous, online learning environment, the course addressed the needs of our community partner and to remain cognizant of the possibility for service-learning courses—especially those in technical communication—to become hyperpragmatic (Scott 2004). To combat this tendency, a significant portion of the course was spent on reflective, collaborative work where students focused on articulating our progressive process, not just with one another, but with our community partner. Following J. Blake Scott’s suggestion to use participatory design principles and an intercultural inquiry process that mirrored the values of cultural and community rhetorics (2004), our class engaged in a partnership with Code for KC that was focused on an iterative, agile development process, cross-cultural and intercultural communication practices, and mutually beneficial final deliverables.

The Mutual Benefits of Purposeful Partnership

The thoughtful, agile progression of the course allowed students to work toward substantial content creation, mirroring that which would be used in a professional technical communication setting—a process that could be replicated by technical writers seeking professional development opportunities in their own communities. While the Code for America brigade gains valuable resources to further its cause, participating technical writers gain

insight into the kinds of dialogue, genres, and processes that might be needed for a particular deliverable (e.g., a website or application). Through Zoom meetings and discussion boards, the deliverables designed for Re.Use.Full function beyond just a gradebook or a seminar, and this ultimately works to promote a mutually beneficial experience for all stakeholders.

Remembering Pragmatic Benefits of Purposeful Partnership

Upon completion of the course, students will have a set of deliverables that can be included in their senior portfolios.

For our class, those include:

- ▶ Web 1.0 content, such as a home page
- ▶ Instruction sets for two different user groups
- ▶ Regulatory content, including terms and conditions
- ▶ Web 2.0 content, including a single-author blog post
- ▶ Community development plan

The same kind of opportunity exists for any novice or experienced technical writer working with Code for America brigades.

Above all, a partnership with a Code for America brigade promotes purpose and drive amongst those involved. Knowing that their dedicated work will bring a net benefit to the community, students are more likely to value their own efforts. Producing deliverables for a nonprofit organization in need is much more pressing than the completion of a writing assignment that ultimately plays no part in the greater good of the world outside of a classroom or grading scale. Along this line of thought, nonprofit partnerships also provide students with an introduction to conducive professional pressure. Deadlines appear to have more weight when the necessary deliverables have specific functions and impact others.

Building Community through Professional Development

As demonstrated by our brief case study, partnerships with nonprofit organizations pose a particularly gratifying opportunity for students and professionals alike to explore concepts of technical communication and to hone relevant skills. In her 2015 article, “Building Identity and Community through Research,” Carolyn Rude recognizes the reciprocal relationship between research and practice, reminding us that the field’s sustainability depends on a healthy relationship between academia and industry, but perhaps even more importantly, that a “sense of community and a practice of collaboration have always been a part of what makes technical communication appealing as a field, and those values continue to define it” (Rude 2015). Not only does Code for America provide a space for purposeful professional development, but it also offers an opportunity for technical writers in every city with a brigade to collaborate with community organizers and

local governments in the resolution of technical problems and—perhaps most importantly—to build community.

The Importance of Local Partnerships and Community Engagement

Unlike more conventional internships or collegiate courses that incorporate service learning, local community partnerships offer a sustained benefit for participating students and universities, as well as the community partner. The same kind of benefits are available for practitioners seeking meaningful professional development opportunities, too, and Code for America provides a valuable learning space to work with cross-functional professionals, such as community organizers, government officials, and coders. These interactions open up further possibilities for networking and mentorships. Whether operating as a function of coursework, or in a professional development context, projects completed within community partnerships come with a higher perceived commitment due to the pressure of working with relevant outreach organizations that have explicit missions, expectations, stakeholders, and timelines. Ultimately, local partnerships and community engagement are invaluable for curriculum design and professional development alike.

Nonprofit Partnerships as Opportunities to Increase Diversity in the Field

The benefits of implementing nonprofit partnerships, however, go far beyond curriculum design and professional development. These partnerships are unique in their ability to increase the diversity of the technical communication field. In the branding study, “Who Technical Communicators Are: A Summary of Demographics, Backgrounds, and Employment,” Carliner and Chen identify diversity as a challenge in the field of technical communication. The recent STC consensus found that 81 percent of technical communication professionals identified as White, while other racial groups and cultural associations were limited to a range of 2 to 5 percent. This statistic is alarming, as such skewed ratios of affiliation illustrate the unwittingly limited breadth of perspectives that the technical communication field represents. Every experience and background is valuable, and community-minded partnerships present a unique opportunity to increase diversity in the technical communication field.

Purposeful Partnership

The explorative and varied work of a partnership with a Code for America brigade supplies technical communicators seeking professional development with the appropriate introduction to several different aspects of community outreach and content development. Volunteering with a brigade can help technical writers explore and practice new skills, learn new genres, and build their local network. Regardless of your place in the technical communication field, a purposeful partnership with a Code for America brigade can be an enriching opportunity for professional development, but perhaps most importantly, the partnership can be a place where you can shape how your city solves complicated problems through innovative technologies and collaboration.

If you're interested in getting connected with one of the 73 local Code for America brigades for a mutually beneficial professional development opportunity, visit: <https://brigade.codeforamerica.org> 

Author Note: This article was written in partial fulfillment of Jasmine's capstone project in Erica's Advanced Technical Writing class at the University of Missouri - Kansas City.

JASMINE R. AMERIN (jasmine.amerin@gmail.com) is a dual-degree student who has just completed her Bachelor of Science in Chemistry as an Honors College scholar at the University of Missouri - Kansas City. Jasmine is a driven student leader who balances her fascination for the sciences with her dedicated advocacy for women's rights and animal rights. As her undergraduate studies come to a close with the completion of her Bachelor of Arts in English Language & Rhetoric this summer, Jasmine intends to pursue a career in technical communication, and she is considering applying for a master's degree program in chemical engineering.

ERICA M. STONE (stoneem@umkc.edu) is a PhD candidate in the Technical Communication and Rhetoric program at Texas Tech University and an adjunct English Instructor at the University of Missouri - Kansas City where she teaches courses in civic and community engagement and technical communication. Erica works at the intersection of writing, teaching, and community organizing, and she is passionate about making academic scholarship free and accessible. In addition to her TED talk on the importance of publicly accessible, community-based research, her work has appeared in *Kairos* and *Community Literacy Journal* with forthcoming articles in *Basic Writing Electronic (BWe) Journal* and *Forum* in Fall 2019.

REFERENCES

- CARLINER, SAUL AND YUAN CHEN. “Who Technical Communicators Are: A Summary of Demographics, Backgrounds, and Employment.” *Intercom*, 65.8 (2018): 8–16.
- CARLINER, SAUL AND YUAN CHEN. “Professional Development of Technical Communicators.” *Intercom*, 65.8 (2018): 17–22.
- RUDE, CAROLYN. “Building Identity and Community Through Research.” *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 45.4 (2015): 366–380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281615585753>.
- SCOTT, J. BLAKE. “Rearticulating Civic Engagement Through Cultural Studies and Service-Learning.” *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13.3 (2004): 289–306. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1303_4.
- SPINUZZI, CLAY. “Pseudotransactionality, Activity Theory, and Professional Writing Instruction.” *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 5.3 (1996): 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq0503_3.