

10 WAYS FOR SUCCESSFUL CREATIVE CLIENT-CENTERED SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

by David Reiss, D.C.D. Associate Professor
Electronic Media and Film Department, Towson University

Abstract: Service-Learning courses with students creating projects for both external and internal clients continue to provide a valuable and effective student set of experiences. This paper reflects on some of the best practices from a corporate/community video production course in its ninth year with over fifty projects completed. From pre-semester planning, to student and client management, through to completion and delivery of final product, the author uses real-world examples to show effective methods for teaching courses based on a Service-Learning model using student-produced client-based projects as the primary learning experience.

If you have never worked outside the halls of academe, it's hard to fully understand what it takes to create something for the private sector. To quote Dan Aykroyd in *Ghost Busters*, "I've worked in the private sector - they expect results!"

If you plan for students to deliver some type of creative service or product to an outside client, that is – quality *results* – then read on.

Before I became a college professor, I worked professionally in video production and post-production for over 25 years in almost every capacity. Starting as a production assistant I worked my way up to sound recordist, videographer, editor, producer and director.

As computer video editing was taking over both video and film editing, I found myself working as the senior editor for a post production house, whose biggest client was betting the 26-hour episodes for their television series could be created faster and better using only this new non-linear digital video workflow. Once I left to start my freelance career I found myself working clients including Discovery and National Geographic, not just as a video editor brought in for a specific project, but as an expert in setting up and troubleshooting systems, managing media and workflow, and training staff in the new world of computer video.

During that evolution, I had to develop a whole set of skills. I had to become the onsite computer technician and expert troubleshooter, video and audio engineer, special effects artist, digital media archivist and workflow expert. I had to blur nipples for a National Geographic news program, nurse cranky client computers back to life to meet deadlines, preach the benefits of digital non-linear editing to non-believers, and spend weeks locked in tiny rooms with rookie to veteran producers. And I had to do all these things smart and fast since I alone was responsible for delivering on schedule.

So I've got a good sense of what it means to really deliver professional results and what happens if you don't.

If your student-produced projects are not well done and don't create valuable products for the client, you've let everyone down. Your students, the client, and yourself.

That's it. A semester has passed and the students hand over that precious final version. It's either polished or it isn't. Everything else is excuses, details and opinion. **RESULTS MATTER.**

"What? That's not fair. These are students!" I hear one professor cry out. Clients can be tough and unfair. This is the unforgiving reality of the industry.

"BUT - some accommodation for student learning must effect the final product?" another proclaims. No. To deliver a shoddy product and blame it on students is wrong. The final product should be the result of a

carefully prepared and guided experience – with a design that allows, no demands success, even if that design may be outside of the normal 15-week academic model, or the typical relationships involved with client-based project.

10 ways for a Successful Creative Service-Learning Project

(In my case it has been in video production, but can be applied to most client services/projects/etc.)

1. EXCELLENCE Your students and you are going to have to put in overtime on this. Warn them and be warned yourself.

A polished work takes a long time to plan, shoot and edit, so prepare for each project to take longer than a standard semester's 15-weeks. Plan to spend a lot of your time guiding and monitoring your students, reviewing the progress and putting yourself at the end of the process.

2. FINAL PRODUCT

Begin with a clear vision of what you are trying to produce. Let that be your guide to every step along the way. Absent a clearly defined goal, students will make a mess of things, the client will be unhappy, and you will have failed.

3. CLIENT INPUT

Don't let the client micromanage or review the process while it is underway. You need intensive time with your students without interference.

The goal is not to deliver the client's every hope and dream. It is to deliver a first-rate, professional result within the constraints of time and facilities.

This may sound like an artificial departure from the real world, but it isn't. In real client work you will also need to get them to back off from the process, manage their expectations, and do a great job within the constraints of reality.

Almost always, the client will find themselves happy with the result despite their frustrated efforts to interfere or micromanage at every stage.

4. REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

As the course instructor I determine what my students and I can actually produce given the resources of time and equipment. Then I define the entire scope and scale of what we can - and cannot do. The client's expectations are then set accordingly.

5. FINDING CLIENTS

I've placed ads in the local city paper, state non-profit organization's newsletters, and word of mouth. I get over 100 requests per year, but most don't make the cut because they don't fit into what I want my students to create as a portfolio-quality project.

6. MANAGING CLIENTS

All require careful consideration and clear communication of the process and product. A senior point of contact is required. If I find out the project has been delegated to a junior staff member or an Intern - I call the client directly. Even good clients need management so that expectations don't slip. This means being IN THE LOOP – if the clients start drifting you'll need to know about it right away.

7. BACKUP CLIENTS

A troubled student/client project should not happen if you pick good ones first - but be ready to fire the client if they do not uphold their end of the bargain, and be sure to do so within the first weeks of the course if possible.

Here are some examples of the few clients I've had to fire and replace by week 5 of a 15-week course.

Agency 1: Did not respond to the need for interviews by a certain date.

Agency 2: Changes project to cover an event to fulfill an Audio-Visual need.

Agency 3: Decides that the project is not what they want.

Agency 4: Handed project off to junior staff member who has decided he/she is not only expert in content, but is directing the video as well.

8. FINAL CUT

Once the team has done everything I've asked them to get the project as close as it can be, I finish it myself. I allow a workload of at least 8 hours per project doing minor corrections and fixes, and then final titles, color correction and audio mixing before mastering and delivering to the client. This is where the extra hours pile up, always going well past the end of the 15-week semester.

This commitment on your part should constrain the number of projects you take on.

9. VALUE

Any project that has over 100 combined student-hours plus over 8 hours of Instructor time has real value. My student video projects are valued at about \$8,000. Explain to the client they are not getting a “free video”. Rather, an \$8,000 video is being donated to their organization. This helps to temper a client’s tendency to treat the “student” project casually. I’ve had only two clients decide not to use their student-produced video, and both were due to the client’s false expectation that they could somehow control the final editing - even though it was clearly stated they could not.

10. CONTRACT

Define what the client GETS, and what they must GIVE. My students keep the footage and have use of the finished video for their portfolios, and each client gives them their full cooperation during production and a reference letter at the end, as stated in the client agreement below:

Thanks for your interest in our service learning community-based corporate video production class at Towson University. In this course, 3-4 students working in a team assigned to your project will each work under my direction to create a 4-7 minute documentary style video.

This class presents a unique opportunity to have a HD video produced at no actual cost, but there is a significant cost in hours as well as equipment. The students will work with you to secure locations, schedule interviews that address the content needed, shoot interviews and any related activities, etc.

The clients are the experts in CONTENT, and as such we will rely on you for WHAT topics are covered in the video. The students working under my direction are the experts in PRODUCTION, and it is important to note that the students are DIRECTING HOW the video is to be produced, including the style and various shooting techniques, which is professional documentary in nature.

Other video project limitations of the course are: 3-4 Days of Shooting; 6-8 Interviews; 3-4 locations; and NO CLIENT EDIT REVIEWS.

Once the filming is completed the team and I edit the videos WITHOUT any feedback from you - the client – NOT what you expect if you hired a production company.

I personally direct the editing of the finished video – and then provide a DVD and web video for your organization, which also retains the copyright to the final video. The FOOTAGE belongs to the students as they use their own media drives for the course. Every Client is required to write a reference letter on

company letterhead to each student team member once the videos are completed.

One Senior-level point of contact is necessary to be considered for the course. Having the project assigned to junior staff is not acceptable.

Finally here are samples of successful student-produced client videos with credits and web links.

INTERNAL CLIENT Student Produced Videos

Towson University: Dept. of Dance
<http://youtu.be/N6bMewgkFkY>

Towson University: Dept. of Music
<http://youtu.be/IFdKbo-jPcY>

Towson University: Dept. of Art + Design, Art History & Art Education
<http://youtu.be/w9Wn7b932iY>

EXTERNAL CLIENT Student Produced Videos

Young Audiences/Arts for Learning
<http://youtu.be/17Yxbxd-K5k>

Baltimore Clayworks
<http://youtu.be/wirMG1ZvYZI>

International Police Mountain Bike Association
<http://youtu.be/AgiTr-eZxo0>

ALL EMF 437 Corporate & Community student-produced video projects
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-B13Czs-YaSkRd4-axp5ZQwhwouw7Bb7>