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Successful Implementation of a Community-Based Writing Project With Public Health Graduate Students During a Public Health Emergency

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Abstract

The disruption of education during COVID-19 presented challenges regarding experiential learning intended for Master of Public Health students to develop writing skills. We describe the Real-World Writing Project, wherein students wrote a public health document for community partners, implemented in the context of emergency remote learning during COVID-19. Community partners and students completed surveys related to their satisfaction with the Project and final products. Students reported skills they used and rated the writing project compared to traditional writing assignments. Community partners and students were satisfied working together and with the final products. Most used skills reported by students were writing, creating a design element, and interpreting data. Students were satisfied with the Project compared to traditional assignments. As public health emergencies (e.g., climate disasters) increase in frequency, remote experiential learning will be necessary. This work contributes valuable information about conducting a successful community project during a public health crisis.

Keywords: accreditation requirements, experiential learning, public health competence, remote learning, writing

Although master of public health (MPH) graduates work across diverse public health sectors such as research, nonprofit organizations, policy, or state/local health departments, they have the common goal of promoting population health. To reach this goal, graduates must be able to successfully advocate for health resources, develop policy, correspond through media, and influence health behaviors through written communication. The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) underscores the significance of writing for public health professionals as part of their accreditation criteria (CEPH, 2021); public health trainees are expected to meet the competency "Communicate audience-appropriate public health content, in writing." Further, MPH students are required to work with public health practice sites to apply writing skills to a real public health problem and create tangible products. This type of experiential learning situates MPH students within a professional setting to gain experience communicating through diverse types of public health writing aimed at specific audiences.

Emergency situations such as disease outbreaks, climate disasters, and other public health and infrastructure crises have increased in frequency across time and can seriously disrupt student learning, especially in an experiential setting (Kiviniemi, 2014). Planned experiential remote learning that connects public health students and practice sites virtually has been shown to foster public health student competencies (Anderson, McCabe, et al., 2021; Goodman, 2015). However, the question of whether unplanned remote engagement with practice sites provides MPH students meaningful opportunities to develop their professional writing skills has not been explored.

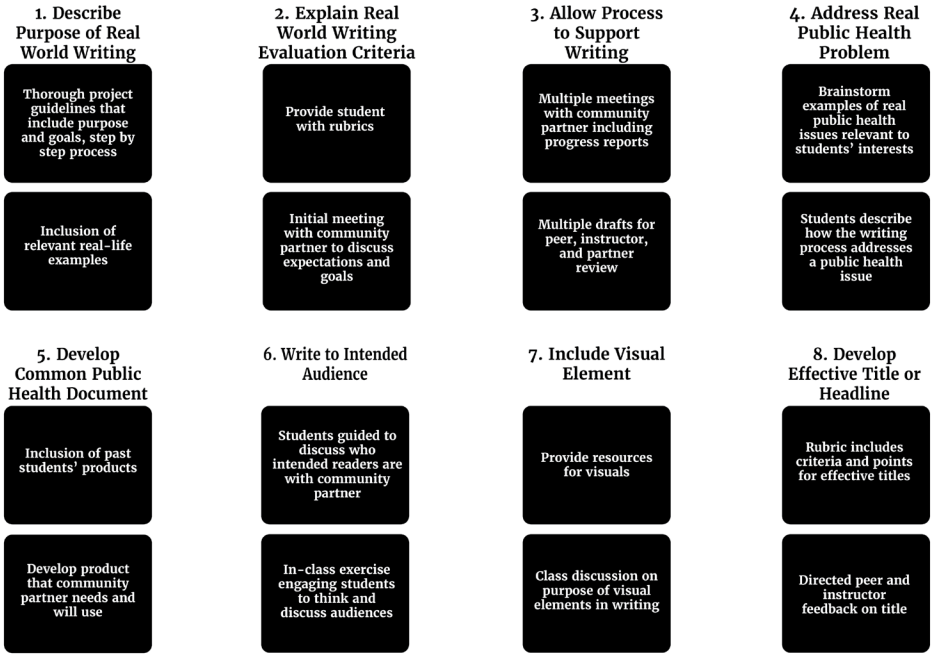
We describe the Real-World Writing Project, an ongoing program in which MPH students are guided through a series of assignments to develop a written product for a community partner. Previous reports of the Real-World Writing Project have illustrated that the Project supports the development of various tangible public health writing products like fact sheets, project briefs, social media content, and infographics used by practice sites (August & Anderson, 2020, 2022). In this report, we present evaluation data from community partners and students who participated in the program as part of a class in which an unplanned transition to remote learning occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our objectives were to describe the number and general type of community practice sites who participated, type of products MPH students generated, and skills students used to complete their project while working remotely. We determined community partner and student satisfaction with engaging in the Project in the remote format and community partners' satisfaction with the written products.

Methods

Real-World Writing Project: Overview and Setting

The Real-World Writing Project partners an individual student or a pair of students with a community organization in Southeast Michigan that needs a written product. Organizations across this region were identified by the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan and asked to register projects through a Symplicity website. Students identified writing projects that had a projected timeline of about three months (i.e., equivalent to one academic term). The product is defined by the organization, and common examples include pamphlets, fact sheets, or social media content. Over an academic term, each student produces multiple drafts of their product in response to feedback from peers, their instructor, and a contact from the community organization. Students are required to meet and consult with the partner contact regularly, with the goal of creating a professional product usable for the community organization (i.e., the "real world"). For example, once a project and document format were established with a community organization, students were required to meet with their community partner to discuss the intended audience, public health messaging, and distribution of the document. For MPH students, this procedure fulfills the Applied Practice Experience (APEx) accreditation requirement for graduation in which students engage with a public health organization and apply CEPH competencies to a real public health project.

Figure 1. Examples of How the Eight Recommendations for Assigning Writing in Public Health Were Applied to the Real-World Writing Project



The Project incorporated eight recommendations for assigning writing in public health (Figure 1). These recommendations are designed to support students in building optimal writing and critical thinking skills and further developing their professional identity (August & Anderson, 2022; August et al., 2019). The recommendations include describing the purpose of the writing, explaining the assignment's evaluation criteria, allowing for a process to support writing (e.g., multiple drafts), and asking students to address a real public health problem with their writing. The Project required students to develop a document format common in the public health workplace, write to intended readers, incorporate a visual element such as a figure or diagram, and develop an effective title or headline.

Data were collected from second-year MPH students (N = 81) who were enrolled in required writing courses in Fall 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic at a large university in Michigan. Due to the pandemic, students were shifted to a fully remote environment with about a month's notice. Thus, the Real-World Writing Project was completed remotely. This work has been evaluated by our university's Institutional Review Board and has been designated as exempt from IRB oversight (HUM00157405).

Surveys

At the end of the semester, we emailed community contacts and students links to an anonymous survey via Qualtrics.

Community Partner Surveys

Community contacts rated their satisfaction with their overall experience with the Project, students' communication and professionalism, and the quality of the written product on a 6-point Likert-type scale, where 6 = *Extremely satisfied* . . . 1 = *Extremely dissatisfied*. Community contacts rated clarity of communication from course instructors about the expectations, timeline, and process of the Project with two options: (1) Communication was clear or (2) There could have been better communication. An open-response space was offered to describe what was not clear. Two open-response questions asked what went well and what could be improved.

Student Surveys

Students rated the ease of working with their community partner on a 3-point scale, where 3 = *My community partner was very easy to work with*, 2 = *My community partner was somewhat easy to work with*, and 1 = *My community partner was difficult to work with*. Students rated two aspects of working with a student partner (if they worked in a pair). First, they responded to whether their "Workload was lightened" and second, whether "Peer feedback helped" improve their product. Each item was rated on a 4-point scale, where 4 = *Agree* . . . 1 = *Disagree* and 4 = *Extremely helpful* . . . 1 = *Not helpful at all*, respectively.

Students rated their satisfaction with their written product on a 3-point scale, where 3 = *Very satisfied* . . . 1 = *Not satisfied*. Students were asked to identify the skills they used to create their final product with choices including (1) writing, (2) data analysis, (3) map creation, (4) creation of a document with a design element such as an infographic or fact sheet, (5) using a design software such as Canva or other specialized software, (6) gathering statistical information from sources such as the U.S. census, (7) interpreting scientific data, (8) deciding which information is most relevant to include in the document, and (9) conducting a literature review. Students could describe additional skills in an open-ended option.

Students rated their satisfaction with the project compared with a traditional assignment, referencing a three-page paper on a public health topic, where 10 = *Most satisfied* . . . 1 = *Least satisfied*. They were offered an open-response option for additional comments.

Data Analysis

Frequency distributions describe community partner organization types, type of product developed, and skills students used to develop their product. Means and standard deviations were calculated for all Likert-type-scale responses. Text from the open-ended questions was coded and analyzed for themes using a conventional content analysis approach. Statistical analyses were performed in Microsoft Excel version 16.30.

Results

Seventeen community contacts (85%) and 40 students (49%) responded to the surveys. One hundred percent of respondents who completed a survey consented to have their data used for this study.

Community Partner Results

Of the community partner organizations responding to the survey, seven were for-profit organizations, nine were nonprofit organizations, and one was a health department. Overall, respondents were satisfied with the Real-World Writing Project, including interactions with students (average satisfaction across student-related items >5.1 on a 6-point scale; Table 1) and the quality of their final product (mean score 4.8; Table 1). The majority of respondents (n = 10/17, 59%) indicated that communication from the teaching team was "good," whereas the other 41% needed "better communication." One community partner indicated "a clear timeline of what would be completed at specific times would help."

Eleven community partner respondents provided open-ended responses. Content analysis of what worked well revealed high levels of satisfaction with the students and process. Four respondents described the products as "high quality," and one noted, "Students were very courteous and thoughtful in their work with me. They developed a product that was exactly what I wanted with minor tweaks." Three respondents indicated they were pleased with the students' listening skills and communication. As one indicated, "Students listened very well to what I explained about my business. It was obvious from the end product they nailed the listening skill." Two respondents made note of how quickly work was completed.

Student Results

Student respondents indicated that working with their community contact was "easy" (mean score 2.9 on a 3-point scale). Respondents were satisfied with their written product (mean score 2.6 on a 3-point scale). Collaborating with a peer was satisfactory (mean score 2.8 on a 3-point scale). Student respondents indicated that working with a peer lightened the workload and peer evaluation was helpful (mean score 3.7 and 3.3, respectively, on a 4-point scale).

Three skills reported most frequently were writing, creation of a document with a design element, and interpreting scientific data (Figure 2). Nine respondents said they used skills other than those listed, but only one described this skill ("Proficient use of a word processor, i.e., Microsoft Word").

The most common types of products that were created through the Real-World Writing Project included infographics (n = 13) and fact sheets (n = 11; Figure 3). Brochures and blogs were common products as well.

Student respondents were satisfied with the Real-World Writing Project compared to a traditional writing assignment (mean 7.5 on a 10-point scale). One respondent stated, "I think the Real-World Writing was valuable and I liked the many opportunities to find something that reflected our interests."

Implications

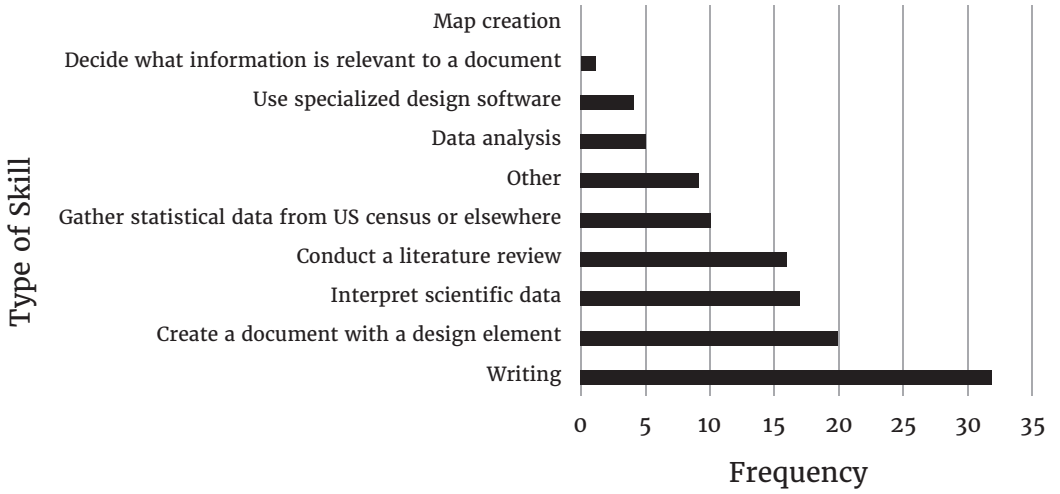
Overall, the Real-World Writing Project was a meaningful, experiential opportunity that worked well for community partners and students during a public health crisis in which severe restrictions limited in-person

Table 1. Community Partners' Satisfaction with Students, Products, and Project Rated on a 6-Point Scale* (n = 17)

Survey Item	Mean (*SD*)
Overall satisfaction with the Real-World Writing Project experience	5.33 (0.69)
Clarity of student communication	5.10 (1.40)
Student professionalism	5.42 (1.31)
Quality of final product	4.83 (1.44)

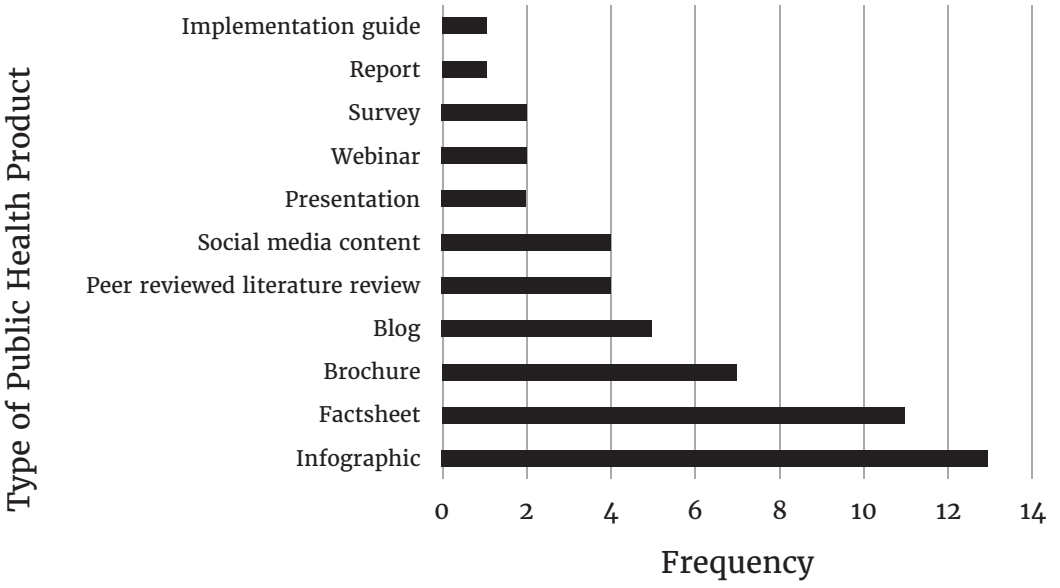
Note. *1 was the least satisfied and 6 was the most satisfied.

Figure 2. Frequency Distribution of the Skills That MPH Students Reported Using for Their Real-World Writing Project (*n* = 40)



Note. Students could choose more than one skill.

Figure 3. Frequency Distribution of the Types of Products That the MPH Students Created for Their Real-World Writing Project (*n* = 51)*



Note. * Students had the option to work in pairs, so a total of 52 products were turned in.

engagement. Community partners were satisfied with the students' written products and their professionalism. Students practiced a variety of skills related to public health writing. It's clear that this remote, experiential learning allowed students to apply knowledge and skills to real-world projects that engaged them in various modes of public health writing while giving them an opportunity to play a role in addressing public health issues.

The logistics of coordinating and creating effective, feasible experiential learning opportunities for students can be difficult (Comeau et al., 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges. During the pandemic, students were scattered across the world, connecting with school-related activities remotely. Community organizations were largely locked down, with most employees working remotely. The pandemic was still fairly new at the time our data were collected, and students and community partners were still adjusting to the restrictions. However, advances in technology provided an opportunity to make experiential learning environments more flexible, and even accommodating for students and their community partners (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). Virtual internships have made experiential learning easier for community partners and more equitable for students to engage in, while allowing for professional and career development (Anderson, Weirauch, et al., 2021; Goodman, 2015). As flexibility in work environments continues beyond the pandemic, virtual experiential offerings will also continue, offering students an effective means to learn valuable public health skills.

In addition to public health, other health profession fields were forced to implement remote experiential learning as the COVID-19 pandemic ensued. Fields like pharmacy, psychology, and medicine quickly pivoted to telehealth for training to ensure their students were gaining skills necessary for practitioners (Anderson, Weirauch, et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2020; Cooley et al., 2021). Likewise, the Real-World Writing Project successfully connected MPH students to public health organizations during a period of remote learning. This project offered students an opportunity to practice writing in different formats targeting specific audiences, resulting in products that promote population health. Products that were created, such as fact sheets, brochures, and social media content, gave students insight for working in practice sites. Building the capacity to offer health professional students experiential curricula that support learning in times of a crisis will equip educators for ongoing and future events.

Next Steps

The Real-World Writing Project provides students with an experiential opportunity within the context of a public health practice site that fosters their professional development. Implementing the Real-World Writing Project in the context of a disrupted learning environment proved feasible. As work settings shift to hybrid formats and the workforce learns how to effectively collaborate within online formats, we will experience an increased capacity to work with community partners across the region and expand our reach to organizations that may have been hesitant to participate. Collecting information that specifically asks community partners about collaboration skills that students may need to develop, as well as assessing the estimated impact of the products created for the organization, will help to shape the instruction that supports the Real-World Writing Project.

We relied on school-level coordination to identify community partners; however, we encountered challenges regarding the communication stream through Symplicity. We believe that, as instructors, identifying and compiling our own list of organizations with associated contacts would be a more direct, streamlined way for students to communicate and establish partnerships with organizations that they feel passionate about working with. We also plan to work with the Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning, a community and civic engagement center at the university with the main mission of connecting the academic community with community organizations to help identify relevant organizations.

Conclusions

This study contributes valuable information about professional development experiences during a public health crisis and shows it is possible to conduct a successful community project during a global crisis. As public health emergency situations continue to increase in frequency, MPH programs must go beyond the classroom to adapt remote learning to support trainees with professional development in the "real world."

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