



Collaborations and Partnerships in User Experience

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Collaborations and Partnerships in User Experience is part of a series of books, *The Foundations and Innovations in Technical and Professional Communication*, which focuses on innovative ideas and approaches to the field. The chapters in this book were compiled and edited by Joy Robinson and Ryan Weber, both established scholars in the fields of user experience (UX) and technical and professional communication (TPC).

The editors open the conversation with a pitch for better collaboration in UX by discussing the remarkably multi-disciplinary nature of UX. Indeed, any project that values UX will involve users, customers, engineers, and more. According to the editors, employers need to know that even though UX is often part of the undergraduate curriculum for aspiring software engineers and programmers, individuals with technical degrees would require a

much more complete understanding of UX to be as successful as someone with a TPC degree. After all, TPC is naturally steeped in reader and user advocacy.

The chapters of this book are organized in three parts: (1) Collaborations in Industry and the Academy, (2) Collaborations in Communities, and (3) Collaborating with Users. The book is dominated by the case study genre, which makes for an interesting read. The depth of reflection and quality of storytelling in the individual chapters brings each study to life.

The first part of the book, Collaborations in Industry and the Academy, opens with Chapter 1, an analysis of collaborations across industry and academia from Benjamin Lauren, Casey McArdle, Jennifer Ismirle, and Keith Instone. The authors examine the differences in expectations and experiences across these domains, noting that professional responsibilities and reward systems are a powerful motivator that naturally affects collaboration. This chapter is notable for its strong research methodology. Findings highlight the challenges of growing and sustaining a network of academic-industry partnerships. The two chapters that follow describe specific contexts. In Chapter 2, Richard Douglas Divine and Mark Zachry describe the post-mortem analysis of a project with activity-based documentation deficits they felt could have been managed by a UX professional because of their unique skill set. Chapter 3 by Heather Noel Turner, Laura Gonzáles, and Liza Potts describes a collaboration between members of a UX professional organization and academia. The study engaged feminist frameworks in its research and analysis methods. The feminist perspective is recognized by Human Computer Interaction theorists as part of a third wave of digital technology integration into the lives of humans where the first wave was defined by human factors, and the second wave was defined by social computing and collaboration (Bødker, 2006). The third wave is defined by engagement with human values, such as feminism, with an active critical component that asks: Who designs what and for whom?

Collaboratively engaged scholars in TPC will likely appreciate the deeply personal description of a university UX research center in Chapter 4 by John Spartz. The center closed five years after opening due to the many challenges in maintaining a continuous pipeline of collaborative industry partners and projects for students. According to Spartz, one of the main issues was the *cadence mismatch* between industry and the academy related to timing—from semester calendars to the reality of promotion/tenure clocks and the cyclical nature of university budgeting processes.

The second part of the book, Collaborations in Communities, describes service-learning projects with industry partners. Such collaborations have the potential to be

transformative learning experiences for the student as defined in Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning (Fink, 2013).

The first three chapters in this part describe student-community collaborations in detail. Chapter 5 by Billy Kangas and Chalice Randazzo features an extensive review of the community partnership literature. This chapter describes projects involving undergraduate students while Chapters 6 and 7, both by Missie Smith and Felicia Chong, describe and then reflect upon a project involving graduate students. Both noted the importance of flexibility and working *with* partners, not just alongside them. A main takeaway from the Smith and Chong project was that *the experience* of the project was a better description of the success of the collaboration than the quality of the final delivered product.

Chapter 8 by Sushil K. Oswal, Zsuzsanna B. Palmer, and Rita Koris describes a simulated service-learning project. This simulated project may interest instructors who rely on their network of industry colleagues for service-learning projects—which will not always yield appropriate projects. In that case, a simulation may be the next best thing, but care must be taken to ensure a significant learning experience for students. The researchers advise grounding a simulation in student-to-student collaborations that immerse students in specialized TPC topics.

The final three chapters of this part of the book address the challenges in developing and maintaining a network of potential community collaborators for project-based learning. All three of these chapters describe a need to ensure that the curriculum for courses involving community collaboration remain flexible in order to reflect the natural pace of problem-solving in the engaged community. First, in Chapter 9, Tatiana Batova recommends engaging with the *Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network* (EPIC-N). EPIC-N is a repository for completed projects and resources in education-community partnerships. EPIC-N projects are not inherently UX, but technology is often an appropriate solution to problems with great complexity. Next, in Chapter 10, Ashley Patriarca and Kristin Williams describe an ongoing opportunity for students to participate in a complex UX partnership as usability analysts of their university’s website. In Chapter 11, Joseph Robertshaw describes a similar partnership along with a list of lessons learned, and it is a must-read for anyone interested in the details of this type of collaboration. Overall, the chapters in this section of the book offer the reader a true appreciation for the complexity of UX collaborations.

The third part of the book, *Collaborating with Users*, describes contextual use-cases in collaborative work. Chapter 12 describes how Amelia Chesley and Cody Reimer used the platform Twitch to demonstrate how user research can be done outside of the constraints

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of the usability lab. This metaphor can be used in the field of online gaming and beyond. Chapters 14 and 15, by Jeffrey M. Gerding and Kirk St. Amant respectively, explore UX collaborations with vulnerable users, emphasizing empathy and compassion. Empathy is a core skill that UX researchers must develop—they need it to create useful personas, journey maps, and other UX research artifacts. These researchers suggest that empathy is enhanced considerably in trust-based collaborations that emphasize humanism, compassion, and mutual respect. The material in this section of the book explores vulnerable users, so references to researchers such as Rosanna Bellini and Sunny Consolvo might also be useful to readers (Bellini et al., 2024).

The chapters by Ginnifer Mastarone (Chapter 18) and Eric J. York (Chapter 13) describe engaging stakeholders and users alike with a human-centered, collaborative UX practice. Mastarone emphasizes strategic involvement at different parts of a project. York takes a higher-level approach by describing how rhetorical and hermeneutic theory can contribute to a user-centered UX research practice.

The last two chapters in this part of the book describe specific tools used in UX research: feature flow analysis and empathy mapping. Feature flow analysis is a lightweight, iterative UX design method that focuses on one feature or task flow at a time. In Chapter 16, researchers Lane T. Lynn, Matthew R. Miller, Holly Lussenden, and Joy Robinson describe using feature flow analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue their design work despite the lack of in-person opportunities for collaboration. Chapter 17 by Sarah Summers and Renne D. Rogge describe a student project using empathy mapping, an analysis tool commonly used in UX design. To ensure the accessibility of the language used in the empathy map, STEM students turned to online forums for individuals with disabilities for feedback.

I highly recommend this book to anyone entering or working in UX and, more broadly, the field of Interaction Design. It may be especially interesting to students and instructors who engage in the valuable, albeit messy, business of service work and academy/industry partnerships.

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