# The Editing for Justice Program: Piloting a Community-Based Learning Social Justice Project in Technical and Professional Communication

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**Abstract:** This FOCUS piece highlights the Editing for Justice (E4J) program, a collaboration between Authors Inside and Cal Poly, SLO's Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) Certificate and English Department that implements Clem and Cheek's (2022) inclusive editing paradigm (IEP) to educate students about recidivism while cultivating their professional communication skills. It concludes with recommendations for TPC programs interested in adapting similar projects into their curriculum on nonprofit or civic writing, editing, and publishing.

**Keywords:** academic-industry collaboration, client-based projects, community-based learning, editing, social justice

## Introduction

Editing for Justice (E4J) is a community-university partnership between Authors Inside, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that works with currently and previously incarcerated writers, and faculty/students in California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo's (Cal Poly) Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) Certificate and English Department. E4J is a curricular innovation which enacts Sam Clem and Ryan Cheek's (2022) inclusive editing paradigm (IEP). It also teaches students about recidivism and helps them gain valuable professional communication skills applicable to the editing industry. This article describes the E4J project case and offers adaptations for other TPC programs.

# Exigency

Since the mid-2000s, TPC has attempted to integrate social justice into its mission, programs, and curriculum (Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016). The inclusive editing paradigm (IEP) introduced by Clem and Cheek (2022) challenges neoliberal approaches to editing that uphold standard language ideology. Cheek (2020) classified neoliberalism as "a socio-political-economic philosophy that subordinates the institutions of government to market forces" (p. 8). Drawing on this conception of neoliberalism, Clem and Cheek (2022) describe neoliberal pedagogy as "the cooptation of the public good that we call education by corporate philosophy and interests" (p. 145). In contrast to neoliberal pedagogy, IEP holds that "any editing practice should be localized and contextualized to the intersections of positionality, privilege, and power that might exist in the editing situation" (p. 141). The method involves teaching students about the ways that American Standard English (ASE) maintains structural racism and oppression, while training editors to "care for a text rather than police it" (p. 142). The E4J project allowed our team to put IEP into practice in a community-engaged capacity. The project also responded to the following:

- Need to address high recidivism rates in the state of California, with about 50% of released individuals returning to prison within two years ("Recidivism of Felony Offenders in California")

- Efficacy of prison writing and publishing programs such as Authors Inside in raising social awareness about the lived experiences of incarcerated people (Toso, 2016), promoting healing (Gu, 2018), and decreasing recidivism (Kashubu & Masterson, 2022)

- Community partners' need for additional editors to help relieve their publishing bottleneck. Given the organization's inclusion in PEN America's guidebook, *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life In Prison*, the organization receives countless manuscripts from across the United States

- Potential for storytelling and creative expression to serve as powerful tools for rehabilitation and personal growth among incarcerated individuals, yet lacking systematic integration into correctional education programs (Kashuba & Masterson, 2022)

- TPC and the English major students' interest in careers in editing and publishing

# Organizational Contexts

Authors Inside is largely run by formerly incarcerated writers, or "peers." Through their first-hand understanding of the challenges faced by individuals in the criminal justice system, peers provide writing resources, mentor writers, and deliver workshops on topics ranging from trauma-informed writing to anger reduction. This programming aims to reduce and prevent juvenile crime, foster safe communities, and enhance the welfare of youth and families. Incarceration often poses profound isolation upon individuals, leading to disconnection and further

marginalization. Written communication offers incarcerated individuals a powerful means of connection and expression. Moreover, books authored by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals offer invaluable insights crucial for parole board hearings, and facilitate successful reentry into society. By expanding employment opportunities, aiding in resume building, and participating in speaking engagements, these initiatives aim to empower individuals and contribute to reducing recidivism rates, fostering a cycle of positive change and self-renewal within the community.

For this project, Authors Inside partnered with Cal Poly. We received a grant that enabled us to pay three student project managers (all English majors, two with a focus in TPC), pay a consultation fee to Authors Inside, and pay two faculty PIs (both in the English Department, one an assistant professor and director of TPC and the other an assistant professor specializing in Indigenous literatures, decolonial praxis, and editing and publishing). We also used the grant to purchase books previously published by Authors Inside, which we integrated into our training program. Finally, the grant allowed us to cover refreshments and guest parking for training sessions. In addition to the paid project management students, two unpaid students (both English majors, one in TPC) participated in the project as editors. The pair earned course credit using ENGL 400: Special Problems for Advanced Undergraduates. For the TPC student, ENGL 400 counted toward their required TPC practicum. For the other student, the editing project counted as their major senior project.

# Method

During the 2023-2024 academic year, our team completed the following project stages:

1. Establish a working relationship between the nonprofit, faculty PIs, and students.
2. Develop and run editor training sessions.
3. Edit two manuscripts.
4. Create technical documentation and a style guide to ensure program sustainability.

## Part 1: Establishing a Working Relationship between the Nonprofit, Faculty PIs, and Students

Project management practices helped establish the working relationship necessary to facilitate project goals and provide student project managers with hands-on experience. Our team initially chose Notion, a multi-faceted organizational software, as a means of coordinating team efforts and documenting project progress. However, due to the inconsistent use of Notion by most team members, we later diffused our work across different platforms to accommodate team members and expedite work.

Authors Inside provided a Nondisclosure Agreement (NDA) to the faculty members and students who participated in the Editing for Justice project. The NDA outlined the sensitive and confidential nature of the work and advised team members to protect potential inmate names, addresses, manuscripts, and other personal written materials.

Further, we used a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a harm reduction protocol and social contract for negotiating asymmetrical power relationships. As community-university collaborators, we are aware of the extractive relationship that universities often enact under the guise of research when working with community-based organizations. The MOU enabled those with less power (students and community members) to express their needs throughout the project. Our MOU established responsibilities for equitably distributing labor. Each party was responsible for 1) interrupting behavior or practices that replicate structural inequity for collective redress, and 2) communicating with transparency so that all decisions are consensus-based. The MOU also listed organizational responsibilities determined according to our levels of compensation, institutional power, and professional qualifications. Finally, it included a commitment to envision ways to shape the project for everyone's mutual benefit.

## Part 2: Develop and Run Editor Training Sessions

### Workshop 1

The first workshop established project goals and team members' working relationships. Authors Inside introduced the nonprofit's history and vision, reviewed past publications and approaches to publishing, and discussed the necessity of an NDA. Then, we discussed editor responsibilities, organizational logistics, and the MOU. We ended the workshop by reviewing the resources required to ensure ethical approaches to a project that centers on vulnerable imprisoned populations, as well as instructions for "flagging" triggering or problematic passages for discussion.

### Workshop 2

The second workshop invited reflection about our personal experiences with community interactions and the lessons that can be drawn from those experiences for the project. We also reviewed our respective responsibilities according to the MOU. Then, students considered the ways in which we might be sensitive to the transformative power of storytelling for both author and reader as they embarked on the process of editing manuscripts by vulnerable people. We elaborated upon this question with a brief presentation of writing center pedagogies, led by a student tutor and project assistant. In this presentation, the student introduced conversation-focused writing instruction for equitable relationship building, as this technique does not assume academic authority over the text. We ended this workshop with a discussion of "flagged" content in the manuscripts and considerations for problem-solving around such content.

**Workshop 3**

The third workshop necessitated a review of the responsibilities of upholding the NDA and the consequences of not doing so. At this point in the process, editors had made significant progress on formatting manuscripts and had specific questions for the nonprofit about the degrees of editing required for each manuscript. Our nonprofit partner shared their Editing Criteria with the editors to guide our norming session in real-time, as well as the upcoming independent editing work conducted over the upcoming term. We established a distribution of labor among the editors and research assistants and made plans for sharing our project results in a formally written article manuscript.

## Part 3: Edit Two Manuscripts

Here, we describe the student editors' process of manuscript editing, including reviewing the original manuscripts and cross-referencing to make sure that the new manuscripts matched the originals.

Editors first formatted the manuscripts, converting text to paragraph style and correcting errors that occurred during the transcription process, such as all-caps text and missed punctuation. Occasionally, the transcribing software would miss a few letters in a word, so editors double-checked spelling against the original, handwritten manuscript. Then, editors carefully read each line, addressing punctuation and grammar for clarity. At times, editors had to work to glean potentially intended meanings, either due to aspects of the authors' handwriting or phrases and spellings with which editors were unfamiliar. Editors used Microsoft Word's track changes and comment features to record edits and call attention to any points of confusion. Throughout the editing process, editors were to remain conscious of our goal: to clarify the text and improve its readability without altering the author's voice or treading on their creative ground. Students also conferred with each other, reviewing each other's assigned sections to make sure edits were consistent.

## Part 4: Create Technical Documentation and a Style Guide to Ensure Program Sustainability

Students created an in-house style guide to codify the organization's manuscript reviewing standards. Unlike style guides that maintain strict adherence to ASE, our approach was to preserve the author's voice and tone. Because the stories we encountered aim to promote healing within the incarcerated authors and their audience, removing their personal voices would also remove authenticity. This applies to the project's overall goal of combining social justice with TPC: editors prioritized clarity and voice so the narratives could better communicate the messages of incarcerated authors and resonate with readers.

Students also created project documentation to establish norms and guide future project participants. One student created a project management handbook designed to educate and advise future student project managers on different processes

associated with their role in the collaborative space. This handbook was created with a social awareness component meant to raise awareness of the varying power dynamics at work in the partnership.

Finally, the MOU was a form of technical documentation that embedded the team's social justice values, established ethical relationship building, and set boundaries around equitable labor distribution.

# Benefits

This project provided multiple benefits to the community partners, students, and academic programs. The community partner benefited from outsourcing the manuscripts to students for editing assistance. Furthermore, outcomes for the community partner included a style guide and project handbook to aid in sustainable program growth. Student editors enhanced their editing skills, technical documentation skills, client communication skills, and social justice awareness. Being exposed to the stories of incarcerated writers helped deepen students' understanding of recidivism and prison abolition. In addition to exposure to diverse voices, students found the process of working with these manuscripts (transcribing and formatting them) to be a unique challenge that not many TPC or English students get to experience. Working with the manuscripts' raw, unpolished texts gave students the benefit of interacting with genuine literary voices of marginalized community members.

This project benefited our TPC program and can benefit other institutions' TPC programs because it exposed students to community-driven, social justice-oriented technical editing and writing, and provided a tangible enactment of the IEP. While TPC sometimes struggles to reconcile social justice-oriented approaches with its pragmatic, economic roots, E4J provides a contact zone between disparate groups who can collaborate to work on community challenges.

# Challenges and Recommendations

In addition to program successes, we faced several challenges. The manuscripts selected for the E4J project were randomly picked from participants' submissions without regard to housing location. However, it became apparent early in the editing process that, had we connected with incarcerated writers from California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo, California, Authors Inside's E4J program would have facilitated a more seamless collaboration, fostering easier communication between local authors and editors. Thus, we recommend that future E4J programs use materials from writers incarcerated near the university editing site.

The project primarily involved editing the authors' initial drafts, a critical stage for evaluating the project's suitability and alignment with the organization's mission. This phase involved meticulous typing and reading through the text to identify areas of improvement and assess the project's potential for advancement, while subsequent editing rounds primarily focused on proofreading and applying author revisions. Future projects might provide students with a style guide earlier in

the process, as we developed the style guide after students had already begun initial editing. Further, we recommend that other programs provide more hands-on demonstrations of how to edit material without changing authors' voices. Such instruction would attend to the organization's mission to prepare individuals for potential release on parole by challenging word choices while being true to trauma and the impact it has on individuals and the community.

Another key challenge of this project was managing cross-functional communication, or the exchange of information between Authors Inside staff, faculty, students, and the authors whose manuscripts we edited. Our team used various approaches to project management, with some team members preferring a more structured and defined organizational style and others preferring a more fluid organizational style. For instance, our team struggled to identify suitable meeting times. Creating an optimal meeting strategy and schedule to accommodate the needs of students, faculty, and project partners may improve knowledge gaps. Finally, regular correspondence between the nonprofit program manager and students is needed to ensure that student editors understand how to balance authorial voice and readability.

# Conclusion

The E4J program offers one model for a community-university curricular innovation, ideally suited to TPC programs and English departments, that amplifies incarcerated authors' voices, enacts the IEP, and teaches students about recidivism, all in the context of TPC. We are optimistic that other programs will find inspiration for collaborations that build connections between various aspects of English Studies, redirect resources to marginalized communities, and reimagine community editing and publishing.

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# Author Information

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