

Mission Critical: The Literate Activity Systems of the McLean County YWCA

Charles Woods & Vicki Hightower

Professional Literacies Project: In this edition of the Professional Literacies Project, Charles Woods sits down with Vicki Hightower, who works for the McLean County YWCA, a non-profit organization in Bloomington, Illinois, that provides services to members of the community. She discusses the complex literate activity system of the professional writing she does on a day-to-day basis, which includes interacting with co-workers, communicating with funders and other partnering entities, and writing grants which fund the programs for the chapter of the YWCA for which she works.

- 1. Vicki, could you explain a little bit about your journey, through college to the current point in your career? I know you have worn a lot of different hats, so feel free to go through that with as much as you want to share.**

I grew up south of Bloomington in Robinson, Illinois, so I went to junior college at Lincoln Trail Junior College there. I came here for my final two years at ISU, graduated with a Bachelor's of Education, Elementary Education with a minor in Special Education. I went right into teaching in the Streator, Illinois area and taught sixth grade for two years at a Catholic school there, and then moved on to Ransom, Illinois, where I taught fourth, sixth, and seventh grade reading and social studies and coached all of their sports. What brought me to ISU originally was softball, so I had a sports background. I really loved that.

At that time, I needed to make a decision: my life had changed to the point where the school I was at had no benefits. So, I took this test with the state, passed with an A and was able to work for Dwight Correctional Center as a Recreation and Leisure specialist. That meant that every free moment

that any of the women inmates had, I was filling it with activities. So, that was about three years of doing that. At the same time, I was coaching Special Olympics, so my passion for people with disabilities was still there, so I was approached to help start working when they were opening homes in Peru, Illinois, for a group home for developmentally disabled adults and mentally ill adults. I did that work for fifteen years; the last eight of those back in Normal where I was the first executive director for Homes of Hope. I help start that agency and did that for eight years. I decided I didn't want to do twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week anymore—I needed a break—so I looked for a job that had a lot of meaning to me, and the mission of YWCA drew me, and so I started over there as the Director of Senior Services. I did that for five-and-a-half years, the last two-and-a-half of those I was made the vice president of the organization.

Then I wanted to do another career move, something a little different. I started working over in Peoria at Goodwill Industries writing their homeless veterans program, putting homeless vets back to work. I was approached by YWCA (because I still lived in Bloomington) to see if I would contract to write a grant—I had done a lot of grant writing in my past. I guess they were trying to find someone who wrote grants, and the new president said, “Well, who writes grants here?” And they said, “Well, Vicki Hightower, but she doesn't work here anymore.” So, they actually reached out to me, contracted with me to write a grant, then had an opening, and I've been back there now for five-and-a-half years. So that's a long journey to come full circle back to YWCA.

That must be fulfilling though.

It is. It is. I hated going. It was just a decision I needed to make, but the mission has always drawn me back. The work that we do there—and now the opportunity has shifted so that I can do a lot of grant writing for all the work that we do—so that passion is there, and I love doing that.

2. Could you explain what you do in your current role as Senior Director of Adult Services at the YWCA?

So, it has changed, especially in the last two years. I serve as the director for the retired senior volunteer program. It's a federal grant-funded program that also receives state funding. It's matching adults fifty-five (years old) and older who want to volunteer for not-for-profits in McLean County. So, we've got just under 500 volunteers we match with about fifty different not-for-profits. That's a primary role that I serve. The rest of my work is as a grant writer for the whole organization. So I write for all the different departments—federal, state, local grants, whatever we need. I am the volunteer coordinator for YWCA and I do a little HR-oriented stuff.

3. What role does your position play in the hierarchy of the organization?

There are three senior directors, so our programs are divided into three sections. I take care of anything to do with adults and especially seniors. Then, the other key component is that I am the only official grant writer for the organization, so all departments come to me for that. We have a president, a vice-president, and then three senior directors, so that is how the hierarchy works.

4. In that role, on a daily basis, what all kinds of writing do you do?

A little bit of everything. You do your traditional e-mails—both internal and external—and then you do a lot of letter writing. We do a lot of thank you notes because we get a lot of donations. I do a lot of those. A good part of my day is grant writing or grant reporting. So, the grants that we have received, reporting on those grants. A lot of it would also be following our budget, keeping that up to date. We have a lot of collaborations with our grants, so I have to be in contact with those other partners making sure we keep all our information. Just another typical day. I don't have one day that is the same, though.

5. Do you like that about your job?

I do. I think that if I had what I would call a mundane job—same thing day after day after day—I don't know if I would enjoy that as much.

6. How does the kind of writing you do now in your career match up with the kinds of writing you were asked to do in your college science and education courses? Whether specific courses or just more generally, during your undergraduate experience. And then, are there things now that you didn't anticipate having to do or which function differently than you assumed they might?

Sure. I would think the main comparison would be with research writing and general narratives. So, back in my high school and college days, I wrote a lot of term papers—a lot of those kinds of papers—and grant writing is a lot of that. A lot of that narrative, researching, quoting, and showing where you get your stats from. I think—in the education piece—a lot of the writing is similar when I have to do scheduling and develop curriculum. I've done a lot of training, so trying to put training plans together is almost like writing a lesson plan. I think I learned my organizational skills and how to break things down in detail through my courses in school.

The question on what I wish I maybe would have learned. . . . Since I had no idea I was going to be doing grant writing, I probably would have taken more writing courses, because I just took the basic English courses that you needed to take as our initial requirements. But, if I would have known how much writing was involved in the work I'd be doing, I definitely would have paid more attention to that and, really, learned more styles of writing. I've had to teach myself and research how to write in different styles of writing. I think courses would have helped me a lot.

7. It sounds like you've had to learn—and obviously taught yourself—how to write in several different kinds of genres. How did you navigate these new writing situations in your career? Was there a lot of training, or did you have to learn to do it on the fly? I guess that is dependent on where you were working.

Right, a lot of it was on the fly. But, finding people who were knowledgeable . . . you have to remember, I went to school in the 1970s, so we didn't have computers. That was a huge difference in style, and I learned the hard way that people can't tell your tone based on your writing. So, really figuring out words and how you're wording things and where exclamation points are important or capital letters, it all changed the whole way to communicate. That people even next door to each other in the building will want to communicate via the written word instead of just going and talking to each other, that was a whole new learning thing and that was on the fly. After it didn't go well, then you correct it a little bit. So, lesson learned.

But, a lot of the more technical things, I tried to find people who had that experience and I just tried to learn from them, almost doing mini-internships with peers and mentors I've had through the years.

An excellent approach, I'd say.

Yes, and it works because you also learn the things that you don't enjoy, like with one supervisor who was my mentor, there were some things that I didn't appreciate, and I learned in that aspect that I didn't want to do it that way. So, I adjusted on my own to say, "Maybe I would prefer to do it this way." And that is kind of my style.

8. What kinds of tools do you use to communicate at work? Platforms, technologies, things like that.

It's kind of humorous because I always tell people, "If it's technology, I'm probably going have to be taught that again." I have learned to do PowerPoint and some of those things; I'm not as comfortable with that as

some of the younger people coming through are. Even my grandkids are learning in second grade how to do PowerPoint, so they teach me some things.

Definitely, [I use] a computer. I'm still amazed by just the facts you know. How does that even work, you know? When they came about, I was like, "What is this thing?" All of a sudden, less paper. But, we do—even the other positions that I work closely with—we have electronic signage that we use to get the word out. We've had to learn new ways to reach applicants, to try to get people to apply for our jobs. So, all the different ways we've done that, whether developing flyers, or through newspapers or job fairs, or electronic signage, it's amazing all of the different things that we do.

One of the [things] I did during the presentation [today] was outlining all the different ways we can get one message out because we work with every age group. I'm fortunate to be in an organization that has departments, so I take things to them and they use the technology and do it for us. We have a lot of interns who come, so we pick their brains and use a lot of their technology. They do our website and keep it updated.

9. Who are you writing for most of the time? Do you deal a lot with external audiences, or are you mainly corresponding internally? How does communicating with different people—internal to the YWCA, and then externally—affect the way you write?

I would say on a daily basis the majority of my work is internal, whether that just be passing information on to others, asking questions, or gathering information when I am writing a grant. But when I am doing grant writing, it is for our clients: it's for the people we serve. So that can be anywhere from our children who are six months to twelve years of age to all the way up our adults, who might be 100. We have different clientele, trying to adapt to who the funder is, to whom I am writing. We also have a lot of partnerships, and so there is that type of writing. But the day-to-day piece, is the forty e-mails that will come in, and they are all internal.

Again, I am trying to figure out how I am going to get the result for whatever I am requesting. Whether that is a partnership, funds, or just an answer to a question, and trying to figure out how best to get something quickly. Everyone needs to be quick. So I don't have a lot of time after asking for something if people need deadlines, especially with so much e-mail correspondence. If I need something Thursday, I have to be exact, or else it will just get lost in the shuffle. A big component for me on changing how I talk is whether or not I am talking with my seniors that I work with. So,

I have everyone from fifty-five to people in their nineties. Some don't have internet access, some don't hear well on phone calls, so that changes things. I have to go back to the snail mail and mail things out. If you send something out in the mail, you have to make sure you send it out well in advance to match up with those who will get it immediately on the internet, so everyone is getting information at the same time.

10. Who has power over the way you write? Are there standards set by the organization, or does it more depend who you are working for specifically? Are there legal regulations about the writing?

Absolutely. Especially if you are posting on Facebook or any social media, we have very strict guidelines on what we can post. On your personal pages you have to have disclaimers that this is your personal opinion and not a representation of the organization. There are all sorts of guidelines just associated with social media.

When it comes to grant writing, it really is funder mandates that affect how I am going to write something. Another component, too, when I am writing is, we have so many programs that have confidentiality laws, so you have to be careful. Really, for the most part, it's following what's established by whichever funder or source.

Considering programs that have a confidential component to them, that would extend to images of those people, too.

Absolutely. We have to have press releases and all these things in place before you can post a photograph of someone. Even in your childcare, if you have a group shot, you have to figure out which kids can be in the photo, and there are a lot of things that go into that. Even just the writing of names, you can't list names. It does change that: you can't just write whatever you want to write.

But, the grants really have strict requirements. You talk about number of words, number of characters, the font size, bullet points, and what they expect to find, it can really drive my writing.

11. What are some of the impacts of your writing? In other words, what does success look like in your writing tasks?

Getting the money. Being awarded the grant, that would be one component. The other piece is just having whatever I have written be well received, whether that be internal communication that everyone understood;

that I was clear. I try to make sure that I'm clear in what I am trying to get across, that I don't have a whole bunch of words messed up.

I used to tell people who I supervised, when you walk out of the room, you should know what I was feeling. You shouldn't question, "Well, I wonder, did she mean that?" I try to be clear and exact, and that is successful for me in communication. But in grants, it's all about if we got the grant!

12. How do mechanics, style, grammar, and spelling factor into the success of your writing? Do you think about this much?

I think I probably think about it more than others, because I try to be so exact with grants, and it does carry over into other communication. Like texting, I text in complete sentences with correct grammar and all the words spelled out. No short cuts, because that's how I typically write, so it does carry over into all the different types of work that I do. I am very careful about making sure words are spelled correctly, when people aren't even looking for that.

I think the teacher comes out as well. I always say, "Don't make me get my red pen out," for the e-mail that you sent . . . my eye is drawn to errors and everything. It's funny because I don't think that I'm thinking about it, but a memo comes to me, and I always tell people, "Don't send anything out with my name on it until I've looked it over because I don't want it to have grammatical errors or misspelled words." That is very important to me.

There is no worse feeling, from my experiences, than sending an e-mail and then re-reading it a day later and seeing that grammatical mistake.

Yes! Grammatical—or autocorrected mistakes—where you really sounded quite foolish.

13. If you were new again, at this job at the YWCA, what are some of the kinds of writing you might wish you were taught specifically?

We do a lot of board reports and proposals to our funding sources and partnerships, so I think learning how to word things for those types of audiences. I'm not sure if there are other things I didn't learn prior to coming [to YWCA]. Most of the things I already knew, but the different styles—because we have a regular board of directors, we have a foundation, so there are different people, and really learning the ins and outs of what they're looking for—that would be helpful.

When you were talking, I was thinking about how we use Outlook for our e-mail platform, so I bet there was a learning curve there.

Everything that we have done has changed since I first came [to YWCA]. But, yes, Outlook was a huge learning thing. I think the big joke there now is that I am trying to understand this “cloud” because I am not sure where anything is going. For me, I am still one of those who prints off any work that I have done because I don’t trust that it will still be there. You know, I’ve seen some crashes, though, so I always have that paper copy as well. But they tell me it’s in the cloud, so that’s the new thing I am learning now.

14. Let me ask you about that. Does YWCA have a cloud storage program that they teach or promote to workers there to save their stuff?

They are getting to that. We have a server and an IT company that teaches us a lot about some of these things. But, with anything new, you go through an educational process. I’m a little slower than others because I am one of those people who is like: I need to see it.

15. One of the things I have heard you mention today was about passion. After knowing you for a few hours, I can already tell it’s not about the job, and it’s not about the paycheck. It’s about the mission, and finding the mission that works with your passion. Could you offer, perhaps, advice or a comment to undergraduate and graduate students who might be reading this interview, or listening to it, about how they might match their passion with a mission?

I can tell when it’s a match when there hasn’t been a day I didn’t want to come in to work, no matter how stressed. As a not-for-profit, we have gone through tremendous downs as well as heights, but I mean, because of our state budget, we had all these issues going on. It was still, “Let’s work together and figure this out.” So, then you realize that it is more than the job.

If I can help a little bit here, maybe this child will get something, or this senior might get something. I do think it is a matter of finding what—when your eyes wake open in the morning and you think about what you’re getting ready to go do—will get you energized to get you out of bed. You don’t have to hit your snooze eight times. That has helped me in making decisions when I have changed careers.

But on a day-to-day basis, when my eyes pop open and I am ready to go to work, then I know that I am doing more than just a job. And so, I think if you can find that, it makes time go faster, it gives you things to talk about. I think that makes life much easier. It's never—obviously—about the money, or I wouldn't be at a not-for-profit, you know, but I couldn't imagine doing anything other than the type of work that I do.



Charles Woods is a third-year Ph.D. student at Illinois State University. Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, Charles graduated with a Master's of Arts degree from the University of Montevallo. His academic focus is in rhetoric, writing studies, and technical communication. More specific interests include research in digital rhetoric at the intersection of identity formation, ethics, and Big Data. He currently serves as a graduate fellow for the Computers and Composition Digital Press, as well as on the Kairos PraxisWiki Review Board. In his spare time, Charles enjoys spending time with his partner and their two pups, Stanley and Peter. Follow him on Twitter @charles_woods1 and listen to his podcast, *The Big Rhetorical Podcast*.



Vicki Hightower is the senior director of Adult Services at YWCA McLean County. She has worn many hats during her more than 11 years at YWCA including director of home care services, director of senior services, vice president of operations, and interim CEO/president. Vicki is passionate about working with older adults and helping them maintain their independence. In her current role she oversees RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program), and has successfully written over one million dollars in grants since February 2018.

Vicki's career path started at Illinois State University with a bachelor's degree in science and education. Upon graduating she taught elementary school and was an athletic coach for junior high girls and she then transitioned to a recreation/leisure role at Dwight Correctional Center. Vicki spent more than a decade running group homes for developmentally disabled/mentally ill adults including serving as executive director for Homes of Hope in Normal, Illinois. Her experience then led her to working at Goodwill Industries as the Veterans' Services Manager where she assisted homeless and honorably discharged veterans in returning to the work force.

All of Vicki's roles have led her to increased responsibility, community outreach, and day-to-day operations of various types, but the common theme is service and dedication to others, which is a reflection of her devotion to humanity.