

Writer's toolbox

An English class on helping fix what's broken

Taking apart a broken laptop, learning how to repair it and putting it back together is a typical exercise in one University of Maine English class. For students in ENG 416: Technical Editing and Document Design, learning how to diagnose and repair electronics is essential to writing about the process in the form of easy-to-use consumer guides.

Since 2011, students in Charlsye Smith Diaz's class have been required to create an e-manual for iFixit, a website that offers free step-by-step guides to help consumers repair devices to keep more electronics in use and out of landfills.

"This experience is important because it is messy," says Diaz, an associate professor of English and coordinator of UMaine's professional and technical writing program. "When things 'fall apart' or the projects don't go as well as I would like, I love it, because they'll face those obstacles on the job every day."

Students work with iFixit's technical writers to adhere to the company's guidelines. As a result, they receive feedback from someone besides the professor while working in a supportive classroom setting.

In 2003, iFixit was started by two California Polytechnic State University students who struggled to fix an iBook without instructions. In 2009, the company started the iFixit Technical Writing Program as a way to engage students with a hands-on, repair-focused technical writing project. Students from 20 universities — including UMaine — have created 5,000 repair guides for electronics, which have helped more than 9 million people fix their devices, according to the company's website.

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Diaz says the project also benefits potential employers by sending students into the workforce with real-world experience.

"It's one thing to go to an interview and claim to be able to write instructions because you practiced during a class assignment. It's another thing to say you took apart a scanner and wrote instructions for replacing the scanner lamp, and then provide a link to a published guide that people use," Diaz says.

KC Collins Cook, a 2013 UMaine graduate who earned an undergraduate degree in English with a concentration in professional and technical writing, is an information developer for IBM in North Carolina. She says every day she applies the knowledge she learned from Diaz's classes.

"We leave campus with a competitive skill set that sets us apart from other new college graduates in our field," Cook says.

UMaine English students have written step-by-step, fix-it-yourself manuals for:

- Sony Ericsson QuickShare T630 (cell phone)
- Visioneer OneTouch 7400 USB (scanner)
- Motorola Adventure V750 (cell phone)
- IBM ThinkPad R40 (laptop)
- Olympus Camedia D-560 (camera)

