

# **Four Years of Teaching a Hybrid, Discipline-Specific Writing Course**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the challenges and rewards of delivering and teaching a discipline-specific writing course in Social Work. The course is delivered half in the classroom and half online. The method of delivery highlights how an online course development tool can supplement a course taught in the classroom, and how various features of the tool can enhance the teaching of writing and peer critique. For example, peer critique can be done more comfortably in the online environment than face-to-face, and the course website simplifies document exchange and out-of-class contact. Social work students, who spend several days each week in internships, benefit from the asynchronous features of the website in particular. The author notes, however, that discipline-specific writing courses should supplement rather than replace traditional composition courses.

## **Introduction**

University writing instruction has traditionally been a “stand alone” process, often focused on remediating student writing problems or teaching creative writing or how to write term papers. Recently, however, some colleges have moved to the development of discipline-specific writing courses. These courses are very effective when they serve as enhancements rather than replacements of traditional writing courses. Discipline-specific writing courses should focus on

teaching students in professional programs the kinds of writing they are likely to do in their careers [2].

This paper discusses one such course developed for a Social Work program. It focuses on three aspects of the course design:

- \* how discipline-specific writing courses differ from traditional writing courses;
- \* the specific elements of a course in Social Work writing;
- \* how a course development tool was used to enhance delivery of a course that is not delivered exclusively online.

### **Teaching Discipline-Specific Writing**

The teaching of discipline-specific writing is controversial. Many English professors believe that only they can (and should) teach any type of writing course. Similarly, many professors of other disciplines believe that the teaching of writing should be left to the English Department. Another argument against discipline-specific writing is that professionals learn to write for their discipline on the job, or in pre-employment internships [2].

Yet employers frequently complain that new hires are unable to do the kind of writing expected of them, and that employers do not have the time or the skill to teach writing to employees.

When employees who learned to write in their discipline only in a single place of employment change jobs, they often note that they were not taught to write for their discipline, but only for

their discrete organization, and that other employers have vastly different expectations that make them appear to be poor writers.

Discipline-specific writing courses seek to expose students to all the types of writing they might be called upon to do during their careers. They also address different ways that various writing tasks can be accomplished, to ensure that students will not face tasks for which they are unprepared when they enter in the job market. However, discipline-specific writing courses should not substitute for traditional composition courses. Instructors from disciplines other than English should not be expected to teach grammar, punctuation and usage; although they should help students to identify writing weaknesses in these areas. This suggests that one form of infrastructure support universities should provide is remedial writing instruction, for students who are struggling with writing because English is not their native language or because their preparatory education was less than ideal [2]. Neither traditional composition courses nor discipline-specific writing courses are designed to remediate such basic student writing problems.

### **Teaching Discipline-Specific Writing for Social Workers**

Social workers are called upon to do a vast array of writing tasks in different work settings. These may include treatment plans, progress notes and case summaries in clinical positions; and agency reports, grant proposals, flyers, brochures and newsletters in administrative ones. Not only does each of these tasks have varying requirements and audiences, but the requirements for each task may differ from agency to agency.

For example, some agencies (often those in which workers have frequent contact with clients) favor very brief case notes, written in incomplete sentences with numerous acronyms and abbreviations. Other agencies (often those with records that are often used in court) require much more explicit records that can be easily understood by professionals from a wide array of disciplines. Still other agencies simplify their record-keeping with forms and checklists that require very limited writing, but are particularly useful for case comparisons and other forms of data analysis [10]. Clearly, workers trained to write in an agency that uses one style will not be prepared to move to an agency that uses another without broad training in writing case notes.

Social workers tend to be good communicators, with better-than-average writing skills. That does not mean, however, that they have ever practiced the forms of writing frequently done in the profession. Students who excel at writing papers for courses may find that designing flyers, which requires knowledge of graphics and layout and benefits from brevity, requires skills that they have never developed. They may also find that writing agency reports for a non-social work audience forces them to excise their writing of jargon that social work colleagues would have no difficulty comprehending.

Social workers often supervise the work of others, work in teams and on committees, and collaborate on presentations for conferences and meetings. These tasks require that social workers review the writing of their peers and offer constructive criticism to improve the resulting product. For this reason, peer review is a critical skill for social work writers, which is also incorporated into the course design [14].

## **The Advantages of a Hybrid Course**

Although much has been written about the advantages of online teaching, not all teaching is best done in a completely online environment. This may change as students become more familiar with online teaching. Today, however, some students have yet to develop the skills and comfort level with online communication needed to best take advantage of the online teaching environment [18]. Some students are also more comfortable with face-to-face interaction with their teachers, and, in fact, some rely on that contact to motivate them to complete course assignments accurately and on time.

The course under discussion was designed as a “hybrid” course to take advantage of the benefits of both online and classroom-based learning, and to enable students to interact with the instructor and their peers in multiple ways. As Social Work is still a very face-to-face profession, social work students seem to prefer the hybrid design to a completely online learning environment. They also seem more comfortable interacting online with students and faculty they have met face-to-face.

Classes meet every other week for four hours, to discuss future assignments and to “debrief” students about past assignments. In class, students have opportunities to practice skills that they will use online, ask questions and observe examples of assignments and assignment components. This is particularly important, because the students work in Microsoft Word®, which makes it easy to share and update documents as well as to embed comments in others’ documents. However, Microsoft Word® documents sometimes appear changed on other computer screens,

or when formatted for different printers. It is important for students to learn how to create documents for both online viewing and printing in hard copy.

The hybrid nature of the course gives students ample opportunities to use many forms of technology within the website. The online aspects of the course increase students' skill and comfort with technology, while enabling them to ask questions about technology in class or in the instructor's office, where use of the website can be demonstrated, as well [18].

The peer critique component of the course enables students to gain feedback on their writing from multiple readers, including peers as well as the instructor. It reinforces the fact that editing and revision are vital to good writing [14]. The peer critique process also enables students to learn from each others' examples as well as from peer and instructor comments. For instance, when one student posted a flyer that included a map to the agency being publicized, other students added maps or directions even before their peers suggested that they do so. This demonstrates Bond's observation that peer critique also reinforces self-assessment [5], and self-directed learning [3].

### **The Advantages of a Course Development Tool**

The university in which the course is taught site-licenses the BlackBoard® course development tool. Most course development tools are similar enough that others could offer a course with similar online elements. Fully featured course websites are critically important to distance education [7], because they contain components that parallel face-to-face interaction and

stimulate online interaction among students and the instructor [4], [16], [19]. Other vital features include the ability to operate on all computer platforms, password security features and a wide variety of communication resources [12]. The university also provides a technical support center that provides training to faculty and technical support staff, an important component in increasing faculty and student comfort with, and therefore, willingness to use online technology [8].

The site permits easy access to any or all students and the instructor by e-mail. Its home page allows announcements, such as notification of extra credit assignments, new resources added to the site and last-minute changes (such as a class being postponed due to poor weather).

The course relies heavily on the Course Documents page, which contains the course syllabus and a number of documents created by the instructor on how to develop different types of writing assignments. These documents were created because the instructor could not locate existing literature about them, despite extensive searching. The Course Documents section also contains scanned documents written by others on discrete aspects of writing, and “inspirational” pieces encouraging students to write or to try new forms of writing.

The website feature used most intensively in the course is the Discussion Board. Students use the Discussion Board for much more than discussion—they post drafts of their writing to the board, within one week of each class meeting. Then students have an additional week to critique the writing of their classmates, using either regular textual notes or embedded Comments, which

are a feature of Microsoft Word®. The Discussion Board saves paper, and simplifies the exchange of documents. Students do not have to be in class to exchange writing assignments; nor do they have to make multiple copies of drafts to obtain feedback from multiple reviewers [6]. An added boon for instructors is the fact that this makes it impossible for students to delay turning in an assignment by missing a class. The course website not only provides access to electronic tools, but access to external websites, as well [1].

Although the website also incorporates features, such as chats, that can only be used when all students are online simultaneously, the course uses only asynchronous features. Social work students spend three days each week at internships, at times that vary according to agency needs. As a result, enabling students to access the website at their convenience is another advantage of the course design [11], [12], [16], [17], particularly for social work education.

### **Lessons Learned Over Time**

Although the course was developed in the hybrid mode primarily to facilitate document exchange, the design has proven successful for other reasons, as well. It appears that students are more willing to critique each other honestly and extensively online than when face-to-face. Students also report that they are more willing to put substantial time into writing because they save commuting time [8].

A surprising advantage of the hybrid model is that it simplifies making up for emergency class cancellations [11], [13], [16], [17]. The course happens to be taught during the Winter Quarter,

when weather sometimes forces class cancellations. On such occasions, while other instructors are struggling to reschedule classes or to cover material in a compressed format, the course design allows an easy reversal of in-class and online meetings.

Despite the lack of face-to-face contact during the critique process, students remain intimidated about subjecting their writing to review. For this reason, the instructor provides course credit for the timeliness of posting drafts and peer critiques, and grades for quality and form only at the end of the quarter, allowing maximum time for editing and revision [15].

Students may request “virtual grades” at any time (undergraduate students in particular appear to need this form of performance feedback). However, they only receive actual grades on their course portfolios, which consist of the final versions of each of their assignments, which are turned in at the end of the quarter. The portfolios are submitted in hard copy to ensure that no formatting glitches alter the appearance of the final products.

## **Conclusion**

Discipline-specific writing courses are vital for students entering professions that require significant writing. They should, however, augment rather than replace traditional writing courses to be effective. Course websites can be useful tools for delivering discipline-specific writing courses, and can be used to supplement classroom learning as well as for completely online course delivery. Essential infrastructure for such courses includes remedial writing

programs for weak writers and technology centers to train instructors in website development and technical support staff in helping students troubleshoot technical problems.

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