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Teaching Writing Skills That Enhance Student Success in Future Employment

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The ability to write well is often critical for effective work performance. Although basic writing courses provide a foundation for college and university students, discipline-specific writing tasks and methods are frequently learned indirectly. Incorporating occupational writing skills in course curriculum better prepares students for future employment. This paper suggests a three-step process for teaching pertinent writing skills in college and university courses: identify writing skills relevant to post-graduation occupations, include writing in course learning modules, and assess writing skills with assignments that mirror workplace writing tasks. Balancing curricular learning with these workplace needs is an ongoing challenge for instructors.

Employers Seek Effective Writers

Substandard writing skills have been noticed in schools and workplaces across disciplines. Writing courses and writing centre programs can teach students about grammar and composition, and library orientations help students effectively locate source material for papers and projects. However, writing skills, which are often related to specific disciplines or professions, are learned indirectly. Coursework that prepares students for future careers tends to focus on the curriculum content rather than the writing skills students use to present that content. Yet writing ability is often vital for effective work performance, thus demonstrating writing skills that are relevant to future employment is an essential learning outcome for higher education curriculum.

Many employers are alarmed about poor writing skills in new employees and have asked business schools to increase emphasis on writing (Quible & Griffin, 2007). Haberstroh (1994) reported similar concerns in public relations companies, and Alter and Adkins (2001) discovered that up to one-third of graduate social work students had inadequate writing skills yet many did not use available writing assistance programs. These studies made a number of recommendations for higher education, including

required writing courses, increased assessment of student writing, and consultations with employers that provide examples of desired writing skills (Haberstroh, 1994). Additionally, schools are assessing methods for writing instruction (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Wolff, 1996) and are recommending ways to continue writing instruction after foundational English composition courses (Alter & Adkins, 2006).

These suggestions form the basis for a three-step plan for enhancing writing skills that improve competency in future employment. First, identify the discipline-specific writing skills that are needed in the workplace. Second, develop learning modules that cultivate those writing skills. Third, design course assignments that assess students' ability to compose documents that are commonly produced in the workplace.

Identifying Workplace Writing Skills

Proficient school papers are unlike most writing required in a professional work setting. Academic writing assignments often focus on testing knowledge. They require defining concepts or terms and supporting statements with references to professional literature. In comparison, workplace writing is more likely to describe or analyze situations without openly explaining the knowledge base or citing sources. It assumes that readers are familiar with basic terms and concepts. Workplace writing is usually more about communicating or documenting ideas rather than demonstrating competence (Beaufort, 1998). Therefore, students benefit from seeing examples of writing in their chosen occupations.

While practical writing skills may vary across disciplines, all workplace writing composes a message appropriate for an intended audience (White, 1997). Two aspects often define this writing: types of documents and the writing styles used to create them. Certainly, most employees need to write letters, reports, and descriptions of work tasks. It is also increasingly important to compose professional-sounding email messages rather than informal, rambling notes that often include slang and personal stories. Additional documents used in many occupations include client contacts, action plans, proposals, and evaluations. The profession or place of employment may also influence document formats, content, and organization.

Likewise, workers may use distinctive writing styles to create documents. For example, descriptive writing may be necessary to clearly present data or develop a foundation for a conclusion, while critical analysis is required for evaluating the data or communicating the conclusion. Synthesizing content from a number of sources is a crucial skill in many occupations. Requesting resources and advocating causes employ a persuasive writing style, and reflective writing may help employees to evaluate their own skills and limitations. Style and tone must also be appropriate for the purpose and audience (Polk, 2009; White, 1997). These writing styles are often familiar to students since they may be used in academic assignments. Linking these skills and applying them to employment and professional settings helps students make the transition to the workplace.

In addition, using examples of common workplace writing tasks can provide class and course learning that emphasizes the practical application that most students seek. These examples may come from instructor experiences or be compiled from community input about education needs (see Polk, 2009; Yu, 2010).

Creating Learning Modules That Include Writing Skills

Most classes include learning modules that teach specific course content. Writing skills can often be easily added to these modules by providing writing resources, using examples of workplace documents, asking students to write feedback, or designing exercises that demonstrate employment writing skills.

Along these lines, there are a number of helpful resources that students can use to improve writing skills and manuscript organization. Providing locations, phone numbers, or web links to writing centres and library resources communicates an expectation that writing is important and that support is available. Students can also be encouraged to review basic

writing texts or discipline-specific manuals, such as *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 1999), *Writing for Business* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007), *APA Publication Manual* (American Psychological Association, 2010), *MLA Style Manual* (Gibaldi, 2008), or *Scientific Style and Format* (Council of Science Editors, 2006). In addition, there are numerous websites that provide guides, examples, and tutorials about basic writing skills, critical writing, synthesis, objective description, persuasive writing, or letter writing. Links to these websites encourage students to improve writing skills. For example, the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) provides a wide range of writing information and tutorials (Purdue University, 2010).

The following recommendations connect typical workplace writing with classroom learning exercises by introducing students to common documents and feedback reports.

- Use sample documents from workplaces as examples for presenting and organizing content. Ask students to critique poorly written reports.
- Formalize the note-taking that naturally occurs during classroom tasks that use brainstorming, researching, teamwork, role-playing, or self reflection. This encourages students to consider the role of written logs or minute-taking for reporting and accomplishing work tasks.
- Give points for posting comments on course websites, such as responses to assigned readings, reactions to class discussions, or reflections about learning experiences (Alter & Adkins, 2006). This asks students to write responses similar to the verbal comments in class. It also parallels methods for sharing ideas in many businesses (Yu, 2010).
- Ask invited speakers to mention the role of writing and the writing skills needed for effective job performance.

Finally, some class exercises can focus directly on the writing tasks required in future occupations by presenting a scenario and directing students to write a brief analysis, reply, evaluation, or response. These papers can form the basis of small group discussion, be part of a series of exercises, or provide a foundation for course assignments. The following suggestions can improve the effectiveness of these exercises.

- Focus on a specific or narrow topic that can be addressed in a short answer.
- Introduce a prewriting exercise (Baker, 2005) that asks students to create three columns by drawing two vertical lines on a page. List information (e.g., who, what, where, how, when, and why) that needs communicating in the first column with no concern for wording or order. Examine these items and identify categories of information in the second column. Draw lines from the first column items to the second column categories. Use the third column to organize the categories.
- Include guides for effective writing in the exercise instructions. For example, present the OABC (opening, agenda, body, closing) framework (Baker, 2005) or ask students to start with a clearly stated thesis or purpose, organize the content by presenting the ideas that support or develop the thesis, and end with a conclusion or recommendation that restates the thesis (Northey & McKibbin, 2009).
- Encourage students to write rough drafts, acknowledging the need for editing to create an acceptable final document. Present a draft paragraph in class and ask students for editing suggestions.
- Give students five minutes to discuss ideas for the paper in small groups before they begin writing. This can sometimes minimize "writers block."
- Require each student to write something rather than ask a small group to write together. This challenges each student to practice writing skills.
- Team writing can be modeled by asking students to synthesize the individual writing

pieces. These can be posted on a course website, become a rough draft for a subsequent assignment, or be submitted as a course assignment.

Assignments that Mirror Workplace Writing

Learning experiences that include writing skills prepare students for effectively composing papers that demonstrate course knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Students often focus only on content, and they may be confused when poorly written papers result in a lower grade. Moreover, assignments that parallel work tasks connect course content and career development, which is a preferred learning outcome for most program curriculums. The natural outcome of teaching students about applicable workplace writing skills is to assess those skills in written assignments similar to work documents. The following examples can test student writing abilities.

- Letters to the editor, responses to a publication, or product complaints ask students to analyze, synthesize knowledge, persuade, and effectively communicate through writing (Polk, 2009). Choose source material that illustrates course content.
- Composing client contact notes or task progress notes evaluates knowledge of work process, integration of knowledge and skill, and ability to clearly and concisely present information.
- Action plans, such as needs assessments or program development, require research, synthesis of ideas, application to authentic work situations, and comparison of alternative approaches.
- Students can be asked to prepare research reports, justify requests for funding or resources, or evaluate effectiveness.
- They can produce a written product individually or in a team. Written assignments may take the form of brief responses, multi-section reports, poster presentations, multimedia presentations, or verbal presentations assisted by engaging handouts.
- Require students to use writing styles, manuscript organization, citation, and reference formats appropriate to the profession (Muller, 2010; Northey & McKibbin, 2009).
- Promote learning by discussing student progress with assignments, giving formative feedback, and asking students to develop a portfolio to illustrate ongoing learning (Yu, 2010).

From my own experience of using these techniques, I have asked my social work students to write a letter to the editor responding to a newspaper story about poverty reduction. Many found it challenging to use a persuasive writing style that asked the reader to perform or support some action. Another assignment required students to compose a note that described an initial interview with a client that they observed on video. They often struggled with instructions that told them to first describe what they see and hear. However, separating empirical observation from interpretation is an essential practice skill, and distinguishing descriptive and analytical writing styles helps students learn this. This type of assignment also compels students to recognize the development of their professional competence. In the workplace these notes ask the employee to communicate observations and assess a specific person or event rather than compose a summary of literature reports. My social work students are also asked to develop a research proposal that would address a real-life situation in their assigned field internship. They must produce a literature review that supports the action that they propose and create an implementable action plan. They also create a poster that they present in a public forum. This requires students to summarize the most important aspects of their proposal, clearly and concisely communicating these ideas, and presenting content in an engaging and persuasive manner to the public.

Student Reactions

Student feedback indicated a number of benefits

from the writing content in my courses. They reported that writing exercises challenged them to clarify thinking and recognize writing organization and formatting appropriate for their discipline. The writing exercises also helped them improve written assignments in other courses and prepared them for writing requirements during internships or employment. Writing descriptive case notes helped them reduce biased statements, and developing clearly stated thesis statements improved the logical organization of case notes and research reports. Many tended to characterize writing as a utilitarian chore or school requirement and had not considered the implications of writing as a career skill.

Competent writing skills are an essential learning outcome of college and university curriculum. Both basic writing mechanics and compositional styles used in discipline-specific occupations are necessary for effective job performance. Students' chances of successful transition to post graduation careers increase when courses identify written documents and writing styles used in their discipline along with the inclusion of writing skills in course learning modules.

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Biography

James P. Coyle is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Windsor. His research interests include resilience in families, youth, and communities, and the efficacy of specialized writing skills as a learning outcome in university curriculum.