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The Classroom as Think Tank: Small Groups, Authentic Exercises, and Instructional Scaffolding in an Advanced Writing Course

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A recent (2015) study conducted by the Society of Human Resource Managers concluded that nearly half of US employers, across industries, believe recent college graduates to be lacking in requisite competencies for communication, broadly, and writing, in particular. This paper describes an advanced writing course in public relations that seeks to ameliorate this proficiency gap by using experiential learning modules, small group learning methods, authentic exercises, and instructional scaffolding techniques to improve student writing and promote workplace readiness. The module series, Writer's Bootcamp, is a short, intensive, and rigorous collaborative among students and instructor aimed at shaping independence and aptitude in writing. Authentic exercises, derived from real-time, real-world situations, were assigned. Students in small groups worked together to appropriate the piece (from the PR Toolbox, a collection of trade writing), collaboratively script, and present a response in thirty minutes. An assessment of learning outcomes involving the programmatic writing rubric, critical incident reports (verbal), and a reflection instrument (written) indicates the Bootcamp as engaging, gratifying, and transformative by students. Limitations are discussed followed by implications for teaching and learning in upper-level, pre-professional writing courses.

An advanced writing course in the College of Arts, Communications, and Design is requisite for public relations majors at a midsize, private university in New York. The curriculum requires intermediate proficiency in writing as a starting point, as demonstrated by the satisfactory completion of its prerequisite, Writing for Public Relations I. Learning objectives in the advanced course emphasize both on-the-spot writing and the application of strategic thinking to written communication. The duplicitous nature of this aim – to help foster a quick, agile written response, as well as cultivate a cogitative, tactical capacity for writing – can pose a problem for instructors.

In the field of public relations, there is voluntary accreditation; however, the profession does not require a license to practice in America as in other fields (e.g., medicine, law, real estate, and accounting). Scholars, therefore, keep a close eye on practitioners' requirements to ensure that their students are adequately prepared for the workplace. Evidence from the profession, however, suggests a marked deficiency in communicative competence (written and oral) among new graduates.

This study describes how student learning in an advanced writing course accelerated when experiential learning modules in an active, small group format were introduced halfway through the semester (week seven). Students (*n=19*) enrolled in the course were third- and fourth-year matriculates in the public relations program (B.F.A. in Public Relations) and varied in age, gender and ethnicity.

To evaluate the efficacy of two distinct teaching modalities—lecture / discussion and active small groups / authentic exercises—student writing completed independently outside of class during weeks one through six was assessed at mid-term and measured against writing completed collaboratively in class during weeks seven through twelve. Factors contributing to learning episodes were analyzed by the use of a programmatic grading rubric, verbal critical incident reports, instructional scaffolding, and written reflective exercises. Evidences of student learning and improved writing aptitude were remarkable: on average up 1.5 letter grades from mid-term, as students engaged with each other and the real-time business situations with which they were tasked.

The Case for Communicative Competence

Despite academia's best efforts, there remains a gap in communication skills desired by business practitioners and those delivered by new graduates. Conrad and Newberry (2012) have suggested that this may be the result of practitioners demanding outcomes-based, functional skills and academics teaching the basic, formal fundamentals of communication. Although there is general agreement on the importance of business communication skills and on the need to include them in the business curriculum (Du-Babcock, 2006), growing evidence indicates a substantial number of inadequately prepared entry-level applicants in this area. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management (2015) identified the main deficiency in workplace readiness, across industries, to be communicative in nature: 49% of all human resource managers surveyed agree that oral and written communication skills are lacking, with 27% stating that applicants have insufficient skills in written communication and 22% citing ineptitude in verbal discourse.

A review of the literature reveals a slow-budding crisis in workforce preparedness when it comes to

writing for the business professions. Earlier studies (Society of Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2009; National Commission on Writing, 2004) have indicated that, while writing remains a "threshold skill" for hiring and promotion, less than one third of employees, current and new, possess the writing skills that their organizations value. Moreover, a significant number of firms reported that although the writing skills of new applicants (recent graduates) were generally considered unsatisfactory, few employers provided training in this area.

This gap between what is needed and what is provided in the world of business is further exacerbated in the realm of public relations. Specialization is growing, assert public relations professionals (Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], 2011), and while writing and research skills remain vital to the profession, today's PR practitioner must wield the tools of both traditional and new media in order to communicate quickly and accurately to both broad global audiences and specific local constituencies (Neill & Lee, 2016). Content creation is in demand; and writing effective content—words which resonate with a specified target—is a highly valued skill. Industry leaders agree that "learning how to grapple with and capitalize on the new ways people create and consume content is the newest challenge in PR" (Greene, 2015, p. 5). The expanse and importance of public relations' communication (e.g., media relations, online communications, integrative marketing, special events, product and brand messaging, crisis management, influencer communications, and community relations) underscores the need for academics and PR practitioners to collaborate in preparing public relations majors for the workplace. PR professionals spend a great deal of time communicating in a variety of forms, including face-to-face and written, and in a variety of media. The observation, understanding, and instruction of these key skills can improve the often-underrated art of communication, an art at the epicenter of every working day.

Literature in the fields of business communication and public relations practice recognizes the lack of preparedness of new graduates with respect to written communication skills, despite a consensus among practitioners and academics of those skills sets' importance. Thus, based on recent emphasis of outcomes-based initiatives, I set out to provide structure to what was otherwise missing in the classroom. This resembled a cooperative think tank environment and involved a writing curriculum designed to teach effective organizational behavior, interpersonal relationships, work processes, and communicative competence.

Theoretical Framework

Revisions to the advanced writing curriculum, introduced in week seven, integrated small group learning methods, authentic exercises, and instructional scaffolding.

Characteristics of Small Group Learning

Small group learning (SGL) is a learning method that places students at the center of the learning process, allowing them to negotiate meanings, express themselves in the language of the subject, and establish more familiar contact with instructors than formal lecture methods permit (Borůvková & Emanovsky, 2016). A small group structure in the classroom often works to help distribute the cognitive load among the members of the group, taking advantage of students' distributed expertise by allowing the whole group to tackle problems that would normally be too difficult for each student alone (Lange & Costley, 2014). Working in groups, students identify what they already know, what they need to know, and how and where to access new information that may lead to a solution to the problem (Lewis & Dehler, 2000). The role of instructor, then, is to facilitate learning by supporting, guiding, and monitoring this process. SGL is a common technique in collegiate instruction, and allows for several specific non-traditional learning contexts to develop within it, including problem-based, project-based, cooperative, collaborative, or inquiry-based learning. Collaborative problem-solving groups are a key feature in the advanced writing course.

O'Donnell submits that collaborative learning is an instructional context whereby peers work together on a task with the goal of all participants benefiting. (O'Donnell, 2002). Over fifty years of research support the premise that when students are active in collaboratively facilitating their own understanding, learning outcomes improve (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2014). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated in the literature that students who learn together in small groups exhibit higher academic achievement, motivation, and satisfaction than those who do not (Schrader, 2015). Cognitive and affective outcomes associated with collaborative learning environments and shared learning goals necessarily depend on the quality of student interaction (Rocca, 2010) and the levels in which students are actively engaged in the building of their own minds (Barkley et al., 2005).

Social interdependence theory, too, suggests that through a shared goal, teams learn to work together for the benefit of the group (Lee, 2016). In other words, an individual learns better with a peer because the peer provides an audience, prompts metacognition, and helps to maintain an individual's focus on a task. The benefits associated with this kind of learning include a mastery of content and improved critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2010). Learning is facilitated when group members strive to motivate and support each other. These cooperative efforts, collectively known as "promotive interaction" (p. 5),

are an essential element of the collaborative learning process (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Thus, working with others to solve a common problem, explain one's viewpoint, and engage in co-creative activity are strategies that build strong cognitive and interpersonal connections. Learner-to-learner relationships are at the heart of the advanced writing course in public relations and draw from both David Johnson's work (Johnson, 2003) on social interdependence theory and Norah McRae's discourse (McRae, 2015) on transformational learning in work-integrated tasks.

Educational psychology scholar David Johnson (University of Minnesota, professor emeritus) described the appropriate use of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning as pedagogy to build a collaborative community in the classroom, and suggested inter-class interdependence by organizing students into "neighborhoods" (Johnson, 2003). A stimulating environment that promotes participatory, neighborly exchange in the classroom can make quite an impact on the undergraduate student. There is ample testimony in the literature (Barkley et al., 2014; Bowen, 2011; Bush, 2009; Rocca, 2010) to suggest that this type of participation leads to high-quality, supportive learning environments where engagement, motivation, and learning are more likely to be achieved. Rocca (2010), for example, reported myriad benefits, including bringing a sense of life to the classroom, higher levels of motivation and critical thinking, self-reported gains in character, less memorization and more interpretation, and demonstrative improvements in oral and written work. McRae (2015), too, observed the transformative potential of social relationships in the classroom to assert that, "taking a sociocultural view provides a broad scope for considering how transformational learning occurs" (p. 142). McRae's (2015) examination of transformational learning expanded upon Johnson's work to include work-integrated learning, a form of experiential learning, which intentionally connects the education of students to the world of work by partnering academic institutions, workplaces, and students.

Covill (2011) pointed out that "while researchers continue to explore the relative merits of lectures versus active learning methods, many educators continue to view active learning as superior to lecturing" (p. 93). While it is true that traditional lecture methods are sometimes preferred by students, e.g., students using memorization as a learning strategy and preferring a discourse that "enables them to listen passively, organizes the subject matter for them, and prepares them well for tests" (McKeachie, 1997, p. 1219), it appears that the instructional format often depends on the content area being taught. Advanced writing, conducted in the context of peer collaboration, peer editing, and authentic exercise, seemed to naturally fit within an experiential learning format rather than that of traditional lecture.

Based on Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, the active small groups also serve to aid students in learning beyond what their abilities would allow them to do on their own in order to reach a higher level of knowledge. As Schrader (2015) explains, "[T]he zone of proximal development is the difference between what the knower can do on her own and what can be done with assistance" (p. 25). An assessment of outcomes indicated that the small group format - collaborative, co-creative and derivative of social interdependence theory - helped to narrow this zone considerably.

Authentic Exercises

Until recently, few authors have attempted to define authentic learning and its components. In a general sense, authentic learning can be seen as learning through applying knowledge in real-life contexts and situations. Callison and Lamb (2004) placed authentic learning at the intersection of workplace problem, personal interest, and academic exercise. Maina (2004) identified three key elements of authentic exercise: activities mimic real-world situations, learning takes place in meaningful situations which are extensions of the learner's world, and the learner is at the center of instruction. Four themes supporting authentic learning, outlined by Rule (2006), help to clarify its components:

1. An activity that involves real-world problems and mimics the work of professionals
2. The use of open-ended inquiry and metacognition
3. Small groups; student self-directed learning in community
4. A presentation of findings to audiences beyond the learning community

In authentic learning environments, students are the inquirers, rather than note takers; and instructors are mentors, or procurers of resources, rather than lecturers.

An EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative conducted by Lombardi (2007) examined possible outcomes of authentic exercises. In this study, student teams were assigned authentic learning activities designed to cultivate the kinds of portable skills that newcomers to any discipline typically have difficulty acquiring on their own: the judgment to distinguish reliable from unreliable information, the patience to follow longer arguments, the ability to recognize relevant patterns in unfamiliar contexts, and the flexibility to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries in order to generate innovative solutions (p. 3). Lombardi discovered that authenticity

allowed for real-world relevance, collaboration, reflection, and practical output in measurable terms.

Student Readiness and Instructional Scaffolding

Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) introduce scaffolding as a "process that enables the novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90). Within the context of small groups and authentic exercises, I sought to increase participation by developing scaffolding strategies based on Donato's (2000) definition of scaffolding, which recommends that teachers scaffold the learning experience by shaping the discussion to achieve goals of specific tasks and to activate the background knowledge of students.

In the context of student writing, some research (Gully, 2012) supports the idea that instructional scaffolding is preferred by students over a professor's edited comments on papers. Gulley opened her discussion on feedback on developmental writing with researcher, Nancy Sommer's, discovery that when asked what they thought about faculty feedback on their writing, students suggested that teachers' written comments on their papers "demoralized them" and "made them feel like they don't belong in college" (p. 16). Sommers (1982) submits that "our teachers need to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones they themselves identify, by forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning" (p. 154). Linking participation with scaffolding has been a focus of research in the recent years, specifically involving mobile learning technologies. The issue of student readiness was apparent in the advanced writing course, and scaffolding techniques were trialed with the understanding that the use of open-ended and follow-up questions can lead to more "substantial and elaborate" (p. 42) answers from the students (Heinonen & Lennartson-Hokkanen, 2015).

Instructional scaffolding infused the second half of the semester in the form of authentic exercises and student conferencing.

Method

This study meets the guidelines, and was conducted under the approval of, the Institutional Review Board of Long Island University. It was delivered in spring 2015 in the author's undergraduate *Advanced Writing in Public Relations* class. This class is a third-year university course designed for majors, although it is open to all students within the College of Arts, Communications and Design. The course is not required for matriculation (B.F.A. in Public Relations), and is populated with juniors and seniors who have taken and passed its prerequisite, *Writing for Public Relations I.*

The advanced writing curriculum traditionally covers aspects relating to writing effective copy in a variety of formats and for a variety of audience. A traditional lecture and discussion format was supplanted in week seven of the semester by an experiential learning module incorporating active small groups, authentic exercises, and instructional scaffolding into the syllabus in order to improve student writing and promote workplace readiness. The module series, *Writer's Bootcamp*, was a short, intensive, and rigorous collaborative among students and instructor aimed at shaping independence and aptitude in PR writing. Authentic exercises, derived from real-time, real-world situations, were assigned. Students in small groups worked together to appropriate the trade tool (from the *PR Toolbox*, a collection of professional trade writing), collaboratively script, and present a response in thirty minutes.

The Experiential Module: Writer's Bootcamp

If experiential learning is the process of knowledge acquisition through hands-on experience (Vadeboncoeur, 2002), then Writer's Bootcamp is an all-hands-on-deck experience where everyone's help is needed, especially to do a lot of work in a short amount of time.

During the first half of the semester, students worked individually and out of class on writing assignments aligned with lectures. Content focused on a writing stratagem and communication processes and applications commonly used in public relations (e.g., blogs, leads, headlines, press releases, backgrounders, media alerts, and public service announcements). The instructor provided lecture time for class discussion on the writing process and best practices in the field of PR. Written feedback was provided each learner on each assignment. Careful review of student writing at week five in the semester concluded that students, on the whole, were unprepared for an advanced writing course. The instructional approach of lecture, writing templates, style guides, and individual in-class writing were largely devoid of engagement and poor grades reflected this. In fact, students' progress seemed to be tethered to the professor's edits and suggestions rather than self-directed. Students were not actively learning the techniques of writing, nor were they turning in work that they were proud of. It was important to take cues from the class to reassess their readiness and capacity to succeed in this advanced-level course.

The syllabus was reformatted mid-semester using an experiential framework called Writer's Bootcamp. A writing workshop method, developed from the work of Donald Graves (1994), required that the students write for a variety of audiences and purposes. This method of instruction focused on the goal of promoting

the development of lifelong writers. Added under the moniker of Writer's Bootcamp, each remaining lecture (from week seven) ended in an authentic exercise designed to spur student engagement, stimulate learning, and improve writing proficiency.

The instructional redesign was informed by the work of Lewis and Dehler (2000): "[R]ather than providing students with well-defined problems with clear solutions, the instructor serves as a facilitator, fostering creative tension and opportunities for students to critique and rethink oversimplified concepts, assumptions, and issues and develop more complicated and insightful understandings" (p. 713). In *Writer's Bootcamp*, active small groups of three or four students were tasked to effectively appropriate a specific PR tool and then collectively write and edit a response to a unique, authentic case presented at the beginning of each lecture.

This method carried through the duration of the course and allowed students to engage in, and take ownership of, each writing assignment. Assignments began with a briefing on a specific, real-time public relations initiative at a recognizable company. The pedagogical considerations for Writer's Bootcamp, described below, build upon the other to create, and ultimately fulfill, the expectation of writing proficiency in the public relations profession.

The nature of college writing. It was imperative that students were provided with a renewed focus. Although students enrolled in the advanced writing course had demonstrated adequate writing proficiency in its curricular prerequisite, it was possible that acquired and newly acquired skills were not adapted to new kinds of tasks in the advanced course. Melzer's (2014) examination of types of transfer: positive versus negative, threshold concepts, low road versus high road, metacognition, near versus far, and vertical transfer allows us to better understand, leverage, and build toward disciplinary expertise in the field of Public Relations writing. For example, if the student practiced metacognition in the prerequisite course, she would have built in "moments of self-reflection to core writing requirements" thus providing awareness in her transfer to "more complex issues." (p. 83). Melzer proposes a vertical writing transfer curriculum principle to "focus on situated, authentic, domain-specific practice as transfer is more likely to occur when learning is authentic and connected to disciplinary and professional practice" (p. 84). It was not just a matter of higher standards: the instructors of PR advanced writing are not asking for something better, but something different (Williams & McEnerney, 2008). The students need to direct their skills and intelligence to new tasks using high road transfer, abstracting from one context and connecting with another. *Writer's Bootcamp* guided students towards this end.

Student readiness. For the most part, the students were ill-equipped to successfully complete the early assignments (e.g., write an interesting lead, an engaging headline, or an effective public service announcement) at an advanced beginner level. Mid-semester, students admitted that they were not practiced, nor confident, in their writing abilities. Instead, students had cultivated a habit of perpetual revision and were accustomed to reacting to multiple tracked edits on a first draft, followed by myriad corrections suggested by the professor. Students seemingly trained themselves to respond to instructors' tracked edits versus thinking about the problem-solution steps themselves. In the end, the final piece barely resembled the students' work. Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi (2008) indicate that "studies of writing development identify meta-cognition as crucial to knowledge transfer" (p. 97). Instead of thinking about their own thinking, students were using low road transfer. Perkins and Solomon (1988) state that "low road transfer reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context" (p. 25). Further, students did not demonstrate positive transfer from the prerequisite course or during the first half of the advanced course. In sum, they did not reveal a capacity to initiate substantive, thoughtful, targeted, and meticulous writing for public relations.

The PR Toolbox. While reports have indicated that practitioners and educators agree that the practical skills necessary for entry-level applicants for public relations positions should include the ability to conduct research and write news releases and newsletters (Auger & Cho, 2016), there appears to be an assumption of curricular consistency across accredited public relations programs. Writing for public relations is a creative enterprise which involves a rapidly changing communication environment. The PR Toolbox was created to enhance individual efforts to be competent communicators both internally and externally; and to help develop sensitivity to the need to convey and receive information quickly and accurately. The toolbox is a collection of tactics and formats from which student teams can choose in order to address their assignments within the framework of authentic exercise.

The toolbox consisted of press releases, leads, fact sheets, backgrounders, paid marketing advertisements, public service announcements, media alerts, special events, video news releases, search engine optimization, internal communication channels, contests, social media, and partnership collaborations. Students recognized each tool as an element of previous courses in the program and, as a refresher, defined and discussed them as Writer's Bootcamp was introduced. The exercise of selecting a specific apparatus from the toolbox involved both strategic thinking and client-centered, problem-based learning.

Motivation to write. Although students recognized

the need to write well as essential in a PR major and understood that practitioners consider effective writing as critical to success in the profession, this understanding did not seem to be sufficiently motivational. Camfield (2016) observed that because students often perceive writing as an overwhelming "monolith," (5) most lack the coping skills necessary for dealing with the natural setbacks that are part of the writing process. In order to help students avoid "feeling stuck" (5), improve coping strategies, and promote intrinsic motivation, writing assignments were assigned and completed in class using a team approach. The excitement and genuine engagement that developed in this context can, in part, be attributed to small group learning and social interdependence theory.

Active small groups and authentic exercise. An active student team approach was designed to enhance discussion, creativity, collaboration, and proficiency. Active teams, composed of three or four students, were created by the instructor. Grouping was based on academic background, gender, and country of origin. This was a successful tactic in vesting the students in a framework that was both diverse and dynamic.

An authentic exercise, chosen by the professor and based on a real-time, engaging public relations situation, began every lecture. For example, the Marriott millionth mobile check-in was celebrated with a surprise lobby dance party. The video of the actual event, and a recount of its results, were presented as stimuli to student groups. These groups were then tasked to become Marriott's competitor and prompted to respond to the successful sweepstakes by utilizing one or more PR tool, write the document, and present it to peers in the classroom. Princess Cruises' strategy to obtain user-generated content to improve customer loyalty served as another example. The details and results of Princess Cruises' program were presented by the professor at the beginning of the lecture. Again students were asked to appropriate a PR tool to further the corporate objective of loyalty by playing it out across a digital platform. Each student team took on the role of PR department to assess and recommend how to handle the assigned situation. After being briefed on the situation and provided a video stimulus, teams were given thirty minutes to discuss and write an approach utilizing the most effective tools in the PR Toolbox. The professor walked among the teams to scaffold and redirect as needed. Student teams then had fifteen minutes to present their work on the document camera to the class, who provided feedback. The presentation format was crucial in the success of the module. The professor conducted a thorough debriefing at the conclusion of each class to summarize learning and guide the discussion toward a conclusion. What was done well and where improvements should be considered were discussed before class adjourned.

Student conferences and instructional scaffolding. In addition to scaffolding teams during authentic exercise, the professor employed a scaffolding method during student conferences to allow for individual effort in correcting errors or performing tasks with instructional guidance and prompts as needed. Conferences were held during office hours on a voluntary basis, and they functioned to provide expertise, focus, and motivation to the students. A large portion of conferencing related to the final writing project, which was completed individually in order to help shape and support writing independence.

Writer's Bootcamp certification. In the spirit of achievement, individual I Survived Writer's Bootcamp certificates were presented to each student at the end of the semester. This gesture was well received.

Findings

Three metrics were used to assess the impact of active learning in small groups and authentic exercises in writing: critical incident reports, grades based on a programmatic writing rubric, and a reflection instrument.

Critical Incident Reports

Informal verbal reports were provided by students at the end of class four times during the last half of the semester.

Critical Incident Prompts:

Q1: What action (if any) did anyone take that you found was most affirming / helpful?
Q2: What action (if any) did anyone take that you found most puzzling / confusing?
Q3: What was the most important information you learned during today's class?

The findings were recorded and collated by the professor, attributed by key phrase, and clustered around three themes: (1) authentic exercises and transference; (2) active small groups and collaboration; and (3) Writer's Bootcamp and practice-based learning. A qualitative thematic analysis of student responses was conducted at the end of the semester (Table 1).

Students found that working in active small groups on authentic assignments and presenting their work to peers helped to advance their communication skills. Critical incident reports revealed that students cared more about concise and accurate writing, the organization of their writing, the expansion of word choice, and application of AP stylistics than they did their grades. Most puzzling or disconcerting to students was the time (thirty minutes) given to complete each assignment. Critical incident reports also revealed that as students grew accustomed to the Bootcamp structure, they became more efficient. Perhaps the most important information gleaned from the critical self-reporting, in terms of future implications, was the

Table 1
Critical Incident Reports: Thematic Clusters and Significant Statements

Theme	Statement
Authentic Exercises and Transference	"I used more PR tools in this one class than in my total undergraduate career."
	"I liked the Marriott video about the lobby event. It was exciting. I'd like to be a part of something like that."
	"I learned how important understanding the situation is."
	"I learned that PR is fun!"
	"I learned that writing is the last thing in the process, not the first."
	"I liked pretending to be a practitioner."
	"I see where the authentic exercises helped me take what I'm learning and apply it to a very real situation."
Active Small Groups and Collaboration	"My team pushed me and I pushed my thoughts to the best possible limit."
	"I liked being in a group thinking about the situation instead of being alone."
	"I liked when my team thought my ideas were good. I like being creative."
	"I felt good presenting. Sometimes other teams did a much better job and I learned a lot from them."
	"The team brings ideas I would not have thought of."
	"My team is getting better now at outlining what's important in the real business examples."
	"I liked looking at an issue from different angles."
	"I was motivated to write better because my classmates were going to see it on the doc cam."
Writer's Bootcamp and Practice-Based Learning	"I developed confidence and pride in my work by working in teams on real assignments."
	"I liked thinking about a solution to a real problem before I started writing."
	"I learned to look at an event through a competitor's eyes. It helped me think about PR from a business perspective."
	"I felt that the 30 minutes went by too fast. We may have done better work with an hour."
	"I'm not bored with writing anymore."
	"I am more confident in writing and presenting."
	"I learned that writing with a real purpose, really weighing the facts, is a better process than just writing for a grade."
	"I like Writer's Bootcamp. I liked doing quick research on the competition."
	"I care more about my writing now. My writing has a purpose."
	"I really pushed myself every class."
	"I learned to write a pitch letter and lead."

common rumination on the imperative of critical thinking before writing.

The suggestion of implementing Writer's Bootcamp for the duration of an entire semester was unanimous. Importantly, students reported enjoyment and gratification in exploring the role of a practitioner taking on real assignments. Many responses displayed an emotional investment in writing. The qualitative data was classified and compared against assessments in the writing rubric and reflection instrument.

Grades

Grades were assessed in accordance with the established writing rubric of the public relations program. Valuation against the following eight criteria, on a scale of EXCEPTIONAL to UNACCEPTABLE, was completed for each student, on each of the writing assignments, throughout the semester:

- Overall content and organization
- Writing organization and structure
- Tone of writing, sentence structure
- Word choice
- Grammar and spelling
- Application of AP (Associated Press) style rules
- Satisfying the assigned requirements

Although the programmatic rubric was familiar to all upper-level students, it was reviewed and discussed in the first session of the advanced writing class.

Writer's Bootcamp evoked a greater sense of wanting to perform well, and scores reflected this, up on average 1.5 letter grades in the last half of the semester. Critically, all students moved out of the UNACCEPTABLE category (poor organization of work, ideas fail to make sense together, reader loses interest, tone is unprofessional, errors in sentence structure, frequency of spelling and grammar errors, paper does not meet the requirements). Progress in the grading scale mirrored positive self-reporting in the critical incident reports.

Written Reflection

In the final class students completed a written reflection activity without the professor present. Responses were anonymous. The instrument, comprised of twenty-four questions on a Likert five-point scale and fourteen open-ended questions (Table 3), was administered online in order to preserve anonymity with respect to handwriting. This allowed individual students to express how much they agreed or disagreed with a particular statement relating to the advanced writing curriculum, as well as to provide focused, annotative feedback. Reflective responses were analyzed for recurrent themes using an open coding system.

Emergent themes, rated on the Likert scale as *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree,* are exhibited in Table 2.

Reflections that were rated neutral by students involved confidence, self-governance, and leadership. Open-ended positive reflections included a cadre of brief statements and succinct assessments, such as:

- It was great
- It helped me think
- Start it earlier in the semester
- It pushed me
- Do it in other classes

A common theme was that the Writer's Bootcamp was engaging, educational, and gratifying. All students (n=19) agreed on the efficacy of key motivations and behaviors in the following areas: practical knowledge, leadership, critical thinking, self-regulated learning, pride, analytic thinking, communication skill development, confidence, collaboration, problem solving, formulation of questions, academic growth, and growth in writing.

The quantitative findings of the reflection instrument, the advance of student scores across the writing rubric, and the qualitative testimony in self-reported critical incidents together attest to the effectiveness of the experiential module.

Limitations

Although several important pedagogical implications can be made through the results of this study, there are some limitations. The first is acknowledging that the advanced writing course contained a split format consisting of two distinct teaching modalities: lecture / discussion (independent writing outside of class during weeks one through six) and active small groups / authentic exercises (collaborative writing in class during weeks seven through twelve), it would be useful to further examine the relationship between the two settings and its effect on outcomes.

Also, this study does not compare the following various areas: the amount of participation of the group as a whole, the equality of participation among members, or the amount of student participation per written response. Additionally, student perceptions are examined in terms of satisfaction and learning when comparing small group learning (SGL) to other instructional methods. Although improved writing is the goal, critical thinking responses through participation, for example, appear to enhance the

Table 2
Written Reflection (n=19) - Likert scale

For each of the questions below, circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the statement, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Neutral, Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
I gained practical knowledge about PR and business					
I had the opportunity to be a leader with people					
I had the opportunity to be a leader on subject matter					
I experienced the opportunity to think critically by applying skills learned					
I experienced self-governance and self-directed learning					
I experienced pride in this work					
I experienced the opportunity to think analytically by interpreting current results					
I experienced the opportunity to think analytically by developing a number of strategic scenarios					
I developed written and oral communication skills					
I acquired new knowledge					
I developed problem solving skills					
I developed confidence with subject matter					
I developed confidence with people					
I developed skills in the art of collaboration					
I developed a comfort with looking at things from different perspectives					
I developed confidence in working creatively and with my imagination					
I learned to formulate questions that led to discussion or learning					
The resources at my disposal were ample to accomplish the assignment					
The experience led to personal growth					
The experience led to academic growth in my field					
The experience led to my growth in writing					
I feel I was prepared for the rigor of this experience					
I cared about the *Bootcamp* assignments					
I care about the perfection of my portfolio					

Table 3
Written Reflection – Open-ended

Q1. My greatest learning experience on this assignment was
Q2. The greatest impact on me from this assignment was
Q3. My greatest disappointment from this assignment was
Q4. My largest contribution to this assignment was
Q5. Now think about your contributions specifically, what was your greatest leadership contribution?
Q6. What was your greatest critical thinking contribution?
Q7. What your greatest analytical thinking contribution?
Q8. What was your greatest collaborative contribution?
Q9. What were the most useful resources you had available for this assignment?
Q10. Do you remember thinking more deeply or less deeply in this assignment versus an in-class course over the same semester?
Q11. What were the obstacles to this assignment?
Q12. Was this a meaningful assignment? If yes, in what way?
Q13. Was the professor available to provide input and advice?
Q14. How would you improve the Writer's Bootcamp experience?

construction of knowledge, self-understanding, and self-confidence. Acknowledging what is actually being said by students when they participate in a think tank atmosphere is also important. Suggestions for further research include ways in which to promote more useful forms of participation in group work, perhaps through additional scaffolding. Further analysis of group work regarding the quality and nature of the discourse and its relationship with written responses is a fruitful area for further research. Individual conferences were held during office hours on a voluntary basis. It may be useful to examine the potential effects on learning outcomes if this were made mandatory.

Other researchers might implement this experiential module in writing courses that have a particular business or pre-professional focus. Future research might also include a formalized, longitudinal examination of the real effects or benefits of Writer's Bootcamp through a survey of Bootcamp alumnae who are practicing in the field.

Conclusions

The experiential module described in this paper suggests that both the course redesign (classroom as think tank versus lecture hall) and the active small group learning environment (student teams writing and editing in collaboration) led to positive impacts on student performance in an undergraduate advanced writing course. Both the initiation of active small groups and implementation of authentic assignments spurred student engagement, motivation, and prideful performance. The qualitative aspects of this research help to confirm a high level of student engagement and development when working in small groups on an authentic exercise. A comparison of grades from the first half of the semester (average score: D+) to the second half (average score: B) suggests that the experiential module, Writer's Bootcamp, helped to hone the writing skills of students and positively affect communicative competencies.

Given the importance that writing in the public relations profession holds, this proficiency is a cornerstone in the curriculum for preparing students for the workplace. Collaborative learning constructs, predicated on social interdependence theory, helped to initiate self-reported gains in student efficacy, learning, and confidence. Writer's Bootcamp was created to promote active student involvement in writing and pre-professional discourse.

Because students were required to participate in a synthesis of opinion and aptitude, their understandings of authentic situations, as well as the serious, professional responses these warrant, deepened. A supportive environment, or think tank neighborhood, further enhanced collaborations in writing, peer editing, and presenting. Instructional scaffolding helped students effectively take on complex and unfamiliar tasks. In addition to improved communicative competence, students built an emotional framework of trust and excitement that can be carried into the workplace.

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