

The Case of the Capstone Course: Reflection and the Commonalities between English and University Studies (BUS) Students



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Introduction

Students majoring in university studies are not unlike students majoring in English—both groups of students are graduating with a degree that is often hard to sell. We, by nature, try to recruit our first-year composition students—to join us in reading great books as well as writing the next great American novel. We tell our students they will be qualified to do anything; after all, a degree in English makes them communication experts with similar arguments being made for those obtaining a degree in university studies. Terms such as “well-rounded” and “jack-of-all-trades” are often used. However, despite communication skills, whether they range from adequate to excellent, it can still be difficult to find a job because unlike the engineer or the architect, there is no one tangible skill students in English, or university studies for that matter, can say they have acquired upon graduation. I have experienced this first hand as both a student and a teacher as well as witnessed it as an academic advisor to more than 200 undecided students a semester.

North Dakota State University (NDSU) in Fargo, North Dakota, typically awards 20-30 bachelor of university studies (BUS) degrees a year. A BUS degree is a degree in which students, along with their advisor, design the required curriculum and create a plan of study. Plans are ultimately designed by each student, but they must be approved by a committee before the student is allowed to graduate. The only stipulation is that students are required to complete their general education requirements as outlined by the university as well as complete a certain number of upper-division courses. For example, a student interested in attending medical school might pursue a BUS degree so he or she could take a mix of biology courses as well as psychology and human development courses—rather than just major in biology, pre-med option. The BUS option allows students to take the classes they want to take, and it is also very flexible for those who work fulltime or have a family. Many of the BUS students take mostly correspondence courses. Upon graduation, students are awarded a BUS degree, but no major, minor, or area of concentration is listed on their actual diplomas or transcripts. For one semester, typically their last semester, it is my job to teach these students pursuing a BUS degree. In the paragraphs that follow, I will first explain what the capstone course for university studies entails at NDSU and its similarities to our first-year composition courses. I will then demonstrate the importance of both of these courses; specifically, I will demonstrate the importance of the use of Kathleen Blake Yancey’s reflection-in-presentation, concluding that courses in which students are required to reflect personally in a public sphere promote both diversity and lifelong learning.

As well as the above mentioned UNIV 489, “Capstone Experience: Beyond the BUS Degree,” I also teach first-year writing courses at NDSU. The similarities between my English courses and my university studies course are quite amazing. In both courses, my students do a lot of writing and reflecting. While NDSU is known for producing engineers, architects, and even pharmacists, regardless of what students major in, they are required to complete a capstone course. For the university studies students, this means they will have to take my course and endure one last semester of required compositions and reflections.

I have the daunting task of teaching the capstone course for those students who, throughout their many years of higher learning, could not find a degree offered at NDSU that interested them or met their career goals. It goes without saying that each of my capstone students are unique; they each created their own plans of study, eventually to graduate with no major or minor. How does an instructor create a capstone course for such a diverse group of students, for one student who plans on attending graduate school in genetic counseling and one student who plans on working as a manager at Sherwin Williams? Or what about the student who wants to own his own ceramic shop? It certainly poses some problems; I initially found it hard to create a meaningful, culminating experience. I view the capstone course much like Karen E. Black and Stephen P. Hundley view the capstone course. Black and Hundley

write, “Through capstone courses, *students* take the second look at their own learning throughout their college experiences, and during the course of this look provide invaluable information to faculty about the quality of instruction and of programs” (3). It is not simply, however, about improving the quality of academic programs; it is also about giving students the opportunity to reflect upon three, four, five, or even six years of schooling. Most researchers have agreed that the capstone course should culminate the college experience—allowing student to reflect and integrate all they have learned (“Capstone Course” 1). If it is a culminating experience, an experience that can provide valuable insight for not only the student but administration, what happens when these experiences are so different from student to student? Initially, I wondered what common element could bring these students together, but I soon realized reflection would be it. As their teacher, I view myself as their guide, a guide that takes them back throughout their academic career as well as a guide that gently urges them toward their futures. I also see value in students experiencing and learning about the paths taken by others.

Lucky for me, there was already a course in place; stepping into my new position, all I really had to do was modify the materials already created. I had the unique experience of taking over the course mid-semester, so for the first few months, I simply followed the syllabus and attempted to provide meaningful feedback to my new students on assignments I did not create. After the first initial semester, I made a few changes, mostly in how the assignments were worded and presented, but I kept most of the original ideas for the course, such as the reflective paper and the resumé assignment. I am quite thankful, particularly to the Director of University Studies, Dr. Carolyn Schnell, for the unlimited access to materials used in past semesters. I used much of the materials that were already in place, but I wanted somehow to make this more of a meaningful—and practical—experience for my students. I saw value in the reflective paper, but I wanted to make sure students were truly considering their entire academic experiences. I also wanted students to practice writing professional documents that will help them in their future career goals as well as understand how these documents are all related.

Course

There is no required text for the course—although an APA style guide is highly recommended. Because I want the course to be meaningful, I try to approach the class in the most practical of terms; in fact, the course could probably be expanded into a semester-long business writing or practical writing course. My students are asked to consider the professional audiences they are most likely to come in contact with in the world outside of NDSU, reflect on their academic and work experience, and create documents that would help them obtain a job that they are most interested in. In this one-credit capstone course, students are asked to write a formal, professional email; a research report; a cover letter; a resumé; and a 15-page reflection paper, as well as meet with a career counselor to discuss their resumé, and, if they so wish, their virtual interview.

As an example of a kind of practical assignment, students are first asked to research a company or graduate school that interests them. After researching, students are then asked to construct a cover letter or statement of purpose, utilizing and incorporating much of the information discovered during the research process. My hope is that students will again realize that writing is about identifying an audience. The research reports, although short, require students to get to know their audiences before sending out professional documents for review such as a cover letter or a statement of purpose. Students are required to share drafts with not only me but also with their peers. Suggestions for revision are constantly being made, and I hope that students can see the benefit of having someone look over their cover letter, for example. (Besides being practical, I sincerely hope that the students see how each of the assignments build on one another—my way of suggesting that good writing is never really done, and that writing, in some way or another, is a collaborative effort. After all, even back in 1990, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford reported that in the corporate workforce some 87 percent of members in the professional organizations they studied wrote collaboratively [60]. Students will most likely have to write in the corporate world, and they most likely will have to write collaboratively.)

Students are also required to contact a recruiter, human resource manager, department head, or professor in order to request additional—yet specific—information about the job or program the students are interested in. This assignment allows us to talk about audiences and electronic media. As a class, we write and critique emails by drawing potential audiences and purposes blindly out of a hat. While the resulting email, depending on the draw, may sound quite silly, it allows us to talk about the language and voice used in an email, as well as how to make the email visually appealing by incorporating bullets or lists so recipients can easily skim the document.

After completing the email, report, and cover letter assignments, students are then asked to revise their resumé (or vita) to reflect the possible job / school opportunity. Students are also asked to revise this resumé one more time after meeting with a career counselor. Through each step, I am constantly stressing the importance of the outside

reader and revision, as well tailoring the document to the specific, intended audience.

The biggest part of the class focuses on the reflective paper—it is here I tell the students to tell their stories. The paper is split into three major parts and asks students to reflect using Yancey’s notion of “reflection-in-presentation,” a term used in her 1998 book, *Reflection and the Writing Classroom*. It is here students are asked to reflect on their academic careers and to compose a reflective essay for a public audience. While the reflection is personal, it is also social because students are asked to consider their readers throughout. First, the students are asked to explain why they chose to pursue a BUS degree. Because they cannot declare university studies as their intended degree until all other options are explored, students have a number of academic paths they have once traversed, resulting in a variety of experiences and stories. So, I tell them “Tell me your story.” Most students enjoy this part of the paper because it gives them a chance to write a narrative, something that many have not written since their first-year composition class. But the assignment is about more than just writing a narrative. It is about helping students become more aware and giving them the opportunity to become life-long learners through reflection. In her article on reflection in the electronic writing classroom, L. Lennie Irvin states, “Notice that reflection is represented as a catalyst that has the effect of a change—a change of knowledge, a change of awareness, even a change of consciousness.”

Secondly, the students are asked to reflect on the classes they have chosen to take, by explaining—for example—why they think a class will be helpful in their future career or schooling. Lastly, the students are asked to apply what they have learned to a hypothetical job / school scenario. It is also in this section that students are required to bring additional sources, demonstrating to the reader that they know and understand what their particular job (or school) looks like. For many, the class comes full circle, and bits and pieces of their research reports end up in this part of their major papers. Yancey reiterates the importance of reflection-in-presentation: “More to the point, if there is a relationship between knowing/learning/the personal, as we currently believe there is, then it makes that relationship more salient and thus it words toward greater learning—which *is the point of education in the first place*” (94): Life long learning.

Lastly, the students celebrate. Students create a three-to-four minute presentation and share their stories and articulate their future goals. Their advisor and committee members who approved their plans of study are invited to attend.

Reflection and Conclusion: My First Year of Teaching

This class, as mentioned earlier, is only a one-credit course, and, initially, it was only put in place to fulfill North Dakota State University’s requirement that all students pass a capstone course. Before I took over, the class met only once or twice a semester—and students were only asked to write a reflection paper and a resumé. As it stands, the class is still offered with a pass / fail grading system. It is somewhat difficult to ask students to complete so many assignments for a one-credit course—particularly when it is graded simply as a pass / fail. I would like to think that graduating seniors would take interest in the course on their own and realize the value in the activities they were completing, but for many of the students, this is simply not the case. I have, as a temporary fix, resorted to assigning a point value for each assignment (see [Appendix](#)), but ultimately I would like to see the course graded A-F. As it stands right now, too many of the students have a very lax attitude toward class deadlines because one missed writing conference simply cannot mean that they would fail the entire class. Even if I ask them to make up the conference, it usually falls at an inappropriate time in the semester in terms of their class projects. My supervisor and I have already discussed the possibility of turning the course into a two- or three-credit course. As with anything, however, change takes time.

I also would expect graduating seniors to know and understand what plagiarism is. My first semester teaching, however, was plagued with a few incidents. I have since incorporated citation activities and a plagiarism debate, but I am still left wondering: Should I be doing more with plagiarism in my first-year writing courses?

Is UNIV 489 is too much like an English course? I have certainly heard this complaint. But for me, the one culminating factor that brings my future doctor, interior designer, hardware manager, and coach together is the need to communicate effectively in variety of professional genres and the ability to reflect—in order to create any sort of change. Regardless of their majors, students need to communicate effectively and to adapt to a wide variety of situations. This is especially true of the university studies and English graduates; they need to be able to communicate effectively as well as to sell themselves effectively more so than ever. Indeed, Randy Brooks, Jodi Benton-Kupper, and Deborah Slayton argue that a university capstone course should be required of all students, and they attribute such a course with the ability to do something that other university courses cannot accomplish. They

write, “the courses in the majors do not necessarily address the broader issues of integrity, ethics, citizenship, and a life of personal value and meaning. They do not necessarily help students understand and appreciate differences in disciplines and among other students. The University Capstone does” (283). What, then, does a university capstone course offer that a course in the majors does not? I would suggest that they lack reflection-in-presentation and the presence of academic diversity—both of which I offer in my BUS capstone course, as well as in my first-year writing courses. English and university studies graduates may not have the one tangible skill that will define them when entering the job market, but they are reflectors—both in the personal and public sphere. They are life long learners, and they are most certainly hireable.

Appendix

[Syllabus for University Studies 489](#) (file is PDF).

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