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Rescuing Writing Instruction

How to Save Time & Money with Technology

AFTER DECADES of trying to grow grass in a sandy backyard at the Jersey shore, my father

learned his lesson. "It only takes two things to have a nice lawn," he mused philosophically, "time and money." Until recently I had drawn the same conclusion about writing instruction.

No wonder good college writers have become as rare as people with beautiful handwriting. The painstaking, time consuming, tutorial-like instruction that prevailed in my small, private high school in the 1960s and

made decent writers out of even the weak-

est students has become an anachronism. The mass-produced first-year writing courses prevalent in colleges today, especially in large institutions, simply cannot compensate for the loss of intimacy, practice, and direct instruction of yesteryear. Yet producing students who have mastered the ability to write well, like the ability to think clearly with which it is interconnected, is central to the mission of higher education. Simply giving up because it's too hard and too expensive, as attractive as that approach may seem to frustrated administrators, is not a viable option.

Although the most proven methods of writing instruction may not have changed significantly in the last fifty years, the technology of writing itself has been transformed. Like the introduction of printing, the introduction of computers has changed writing forever. The days of students sifting through piles of file cards, producing detailed outlines, and handwriting drafts have slipped into the distant past. Students write quickly and casually with the assistance of technology, and common

sense dictates that we need to use technology to teach them to write better.

It was that line of thinking that led the faculty director of the writing program at the University of Pennsylvania and me, the director of writing across the university, to decide to apply technology to the goal of making writing instruction more cost-effective. With the help of a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Cost-Effective Uses of Technology in Teaching (CEUTT) initiative, we proposed to design a new, technology-based model for teaching writing.

From 1997 to 2002 a team of experienced graduate student instructors from several different departments worked with me to create, test, and refine the course, leading up to a comprehensive evaluation during the 2001-2 academic year. The results of that study shed some light on the cost and quality of current writing instruction and offer food for thought about what the future might hold.

Value and cost

In *Making the Most of College* (2001), Richard Light draws a startling conclusion about the centrality of writing in learning. "The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students' level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students' level of interest in it," Light reports, "is stronger than the relationship between students' engagement and any other course characteristic.... The simple correlation between the amount of writing required in a course and students' overall commitment to it tells a lot about the importance of writing" (2001, 55-56).

At a critical juncture in decision making about priorities and costs, this evidence reminds us that writing continues to play a major role in the intellectual life of students. Good writing is essential not only to effective communication. The process of writing itself promotes learning and can serve as a central

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tool for inquiry and a route to new knowledge. Students who lack the skills necessary to write effectively are handicapped as learners. Today's writing instruction should focus on empowering students to make the most out of their education and not simply on learning the rules of grammar and style.

For those of us involved in writing across the curriculum, Light's conclusions come as no surprise. The link between the discipline of writing, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the development of critical thinking skills has been well established. Since 1977, when American researcher Janet Emig published her seminal article, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," advocates for writing across the curriculum have struggled to present their case to college and university faculty. (See David R. Russell's *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*, 276-307, for an overview of the roots and early progress of writing across the curriculum.) Yet, in the face of a significant body of research that connects writing and learning, the integration of writing into the disciplines continues to languish, and distress about lack of mastery of the surface features of writing continues to drive writing instruction.

The choice—to pursue the narrowest definition of writing proficiency—has had unforeseen consequences for higher education. Efforts to isolate writing and drill grammar and style into the heads of recalcitrant learners have proven both expensive and ineffective. Cost-cutting measures, such as substituting virtual armies of part-time and adjunct instructors for full-time faculty, have not brought satisfactory results. Writing instruction goes on as an undervalued and marginalized add-on to the core intellectual business of higher education, and both students and instructors voice dissatisfaction with the outcome.

The search for effective methods

Technology has challenged basic assumptions about how we write and how we can best teach writing, throwing the field into confusion, but it has also provided new resources for teaching and learning about writing. Technology-enhanced writing instruction has the potential to solve several of the problems associated

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with writing instruction at once. As Joel Foreman suggests in a recent article in *The Technology Source* (2002), it is likely that the computer will shortly remove the tedium of editing and managing student text to identify patterns of errors and ensure correctness.

Smarter, more sophisticated programs on the horizon will lead to better methods for collecting data, tracking and evaluating student performance, and providing guidance and feedback. Such high-tech tools will both ease the burden on instructors and improve cost-effectiveness. With such developments looming, the case for focusing instructional time and attention on the elements of writing that go beneath the surface becomes even stronger. Integrating writing instruction more fully across the curriculum could greatly enhance that effort.

Overview of the project

With this context in mind, four graduate student instructors from several different disciplines, all veteran teachers of writing across the curriculum, helped to develop technology-enhanced methodology for writing instruction. Focusing on the identified strengths of technology, in particular its capacity to make communication easier, facilitate collaboration, and distribute instruction beyond the conventional boundaries of time and space, we designed a largely Web-based curriculum. Although we made no effort to replicate a traditional course, we required the same amount of writing overall, completed in shorter assignments deemed more appropriate for the electronic environment, and included many of the same assignments as traditional courses.

We focused on the writing experiences we thought all students needed to become successful writers. We addressed the most common complaints about traditional writing instruction, especially the isolation of writing from the rest of the curriculum, and we incorporated some of the best practices, such as the use of peer review and emphasis on revision. Because we viewed technology as a means to an end and not an end in itself, we chose to work with Blackboard, a course management system the university made available, rather than create our own software. Since we were



not invested in any specific program, we rooted the curriculum in a conceptual foundation that can be formatted for any platform and modified to suit the needs of individual instructors or teams.

We paid special attention to the ways in which technology might improve writing instruction, for example, by facilitating collaboration. The creation of electronic writing

groups enables students to post their work and receive feedback either embedded in the original text or beneath it. Complex interactions take place neatly in the small group space on the Web site at times convenient for the instructor and students. The versions of the text produced and all commentary on it are preserved in one place and available for future reference.

In order to compare electronic writing groups with traditional courses, we kept the goals for and features of writing courses constant. Using the same graduate student instructors who teach traditional writing courses facilitated cost and workload comparisons. Students were initially assigned to instructors in groups of thirty, a number designed to approximate the average number of students a writing instructor would normally teach over two semesters. During the grant period, because of the demands of the research, a single group of thirty for the year replaced one writing class taught each semester and constituted a full load for each instructor. Later, since electronic writing groups only count as a half course each semester, teaching one large group for a year became the equivalent of teaching only one writing course.

Each instructor then divided the large group of thirty into smaller cohorts of four to six. Most assignments were completed in the small groups. Small groups occasionally had assignments requiring them to meet in the chat room, and groups occasionally met face-to-face at their own initiative. We met all the students in the program three times a year—in the fall, at the beginning of the second semester, and at the end of the year. Those meetings encouraged students to identify with the program but did not significantly influence learning outcomes.

Over the five years of the grant period, we tested course units, surveyed students, and refined the curriculum. We also enhanced the Web site-based learning environment by adding visuals and audio and video files. When we evaluated the course in the fifth year and compared the learning outcomes to those produced in traditional classes, we were confident that our model would compare favorably—and it did.

Key features

Our initial focus on collaboration led us to discover an unexpected positive feature of the writing groups: team teaching. Traditionally expensive and inefficient, team teaching proved highly cost-effective with technology.

From the beginning, we divided up the work of designing the course, which greatly reduced the time and energy each of us had to allot to course construction. Collaboration also enhanced the final product as each instructor contributed material culled from personal

experience. An instructor from the classical studies department developed the unit on argumentation using a Web site called *Silva Rhetoricae*. For the third year of the project, we intentionally sought out a graduate instructor/collaborator in history of art to enhance the visual presentation on our Web site.

We exchanged ideas and shared work frequently via e-mail. Instructors shared teaching responsibilities such as e-mail instructions and unit summaries among themselves, reducing the amount of time each instructor spent developing course materials. As a team, we discussed the success or failure of assignments and strategies and then gave the task of modifying the curriculum to a single instructor. New instructors did not have to reinvent the wheel or start from scratch. The availability of records helped to ensure continuity in the program from year to year, and I could easily review and evaluate the work of instructors to guarantee quality control.

Changing the teacher's role

The highly structured Web environment and the absence of face-to-face class meetings led instructors to see themselves more like course facilitators than traditional professors. The assignments were all posted, and students received clearly articulated instructions along with stated deadlines. Almost all assignments were posted for peer review. Peer mentors created a model for the students to follow. When instructors entered the learning environment, they generally expanded, elaborated, or clarified student writing. The process of teaching revolved around keeping students focused and responding to their work. As a result of these differences, instructors felt comfortable teaching more students than they would in a conventional writing class.

Not having to go to a classroom to teach and not having to plan classes freed up instructional time. Like the students, instructors could complete their coursework at any time and in many different places, while maintaining communication with their students and oversight of their classes. The convenience alone made workloads feel lighter.

Distributing instruction

In order to integrate their writing experiences across the curriculum rather than try to replicate those experiences in their writing course,

we required students to submit two draft papers each semester from their other courses to their writing group for review. They then revised those papers and posted their revisions. This approach to extending learning, a common model for implementing writing across the curriculum, was designed to take advantage of the freedom from time and space constraints that electronic distribution offered.

This feature emerged as an extremely popular aspect of electronic writing groups. In spite of the pressures involved in reading many papers at the middle and end of each semester and giving each other feedback, students appreciated this aspect of the course more than many others. They reported that it improved their work in their other classes and often, to their great satisfaction, resulted in higher grades.

The ability to review and analyze their students' writing in other courses gave writing instructors a rare view of how students were applying what they learned in their writing groups, enabling them to adjust their writing instruction as appropriate. It also helped peer reviewers as well as the writers themselves realize the value of their writing group assignments.

Extending the term

Because acquiring writing skill takes time, common wisdom suggests that more extended exposure to writing instruction benefits students. Electronic delivery creates a unique opportunity to alter length of instruction without adding course units or additional time to the student's or instructor's load. Eliminating formal class meetings and focusing on shorter, more concentrated writing activities ensured that the class work felt lighter than a traditional course, making a half-credit per semester seem appropriate.

Extending writing instruction over a full year had several clear benefits. It enabled the groups to cover more topics, including subjects like voice, often neglected in conventional composition classes; it gave students opportunities to try out what they learned in their writing groups in different contexts; and it gave students sufficient time to think about, practice, and incorporate new writing techniques. It also enabled instructors to get to know students better and work with them more intensively over a longer period of time without requiring any more effort than a traditional one-semester class would.

The quality question

During the fifth year of the project, we formally evaluated the program by surveying students along with their peers in traditional writing courses about their experiences, comparing the cost of electronic writing groups to the cost of conventional writing courses, and comparing the quality of the writing produced in each environment. The results of our study validated many of our choices. The evaluation revealed that students in the electronic writing groups learned as much and, in some cases, more about important aspects of writing than their counterparts in traditional comparison groups. Outside evaluators judged the written work of students in the electronic writing groups as equal to and, in some cases, superior to the work of their counterparts. At the same time, the Mellon students found their instructors more accessible, and they experienced a stronger sense of community than did the students who met their instructors and classmates twice a week face-to-face.

During the year of the study, electronic writing groups did not prove more cost-effective than traditional writing classes, but a few more students in each group would have bridged the gap. We are confident that the model will prove cost-effective in future years.

We trust that these study results will dispel some myths and reassure those who are hesitating, concerned about the character and quality of electronic instruction. The potential to enhance learning through the use of technology presents a challenge that is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore. The likelihood that instruction will become less costly at the same time makes the effort seem almost irresistible. □

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