

Assurance of learning in a writing-intensive business course

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ABSTRACT

Writing intensive courses provide a means of addressing declining student writing proficiency. Programmatic learning goals accomplished through a writing-intensive course can be used to develop students' writing skills. For business communication faculty members to maximize the value of their courses to business programs, they should demonstrate the important relationship between achieving learning goals for a degree program and the student learning objectives for a business writing-intensive class. Multiple assessment measures should be used including those of the instructor, students, and external evaluators. The results of these assessments should be used to tweak the course and make course revisions that will improve students' writing skills and enhance their performance in the workplace.

Keywords: Writing-intensive Course, Assessment, Accreditation, Assurance of Learning, Learning Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

Research in American educational institutions has provoked concern that many students lack strong writing skills. Poor writing skills can result in significant difficulties for students and society as a whole. When entering the workforce, individuals lacking this expertise often face limited career choices and lower earnings potential. To improve their skill sets and experience success, increasing numbers of students need additional writing remediation (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008).

A survey conducted by The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004) revealed that effective writing is fundamental in today's professional environment. The Commission refers to writing as a "threshold skill" for salaried employment and advancement. Occupational and individual success in the United States is dependent on one's ability to portray thoughts logically and clearly on paper. Approximately 70 percent of the responding corporations indicated that two-thirds or more of their salaried employees have some responsibility for writing. With increasing emphasis on desired graduate profiles shaping university programs and more intense competition in tertiary sectors around the world, improving the writing proficiency of graduates must be a priority for every university and faculty (Docherty, Tse, Forman, & McKenzie, 2010).

Corporate human resource directors have expressed a fair degree of dissatisfaction with the writing abilities of recent college graduates. A respondent to a survey of business leaders stated, "The skills of new college graduates are deplorable—across the board; spelling, grammar, sentence structure . . . I [cannot] believe people come out of college now not knowing what a sentence is" (National, 2004, p. 14). Another professional participating in the survey said, "People's writing skills are not where they need to be. Apart from grammar, many employees [do not] understand the need for an appropriate level of detail, reasoning, [and] structure" (National, 2004, p. 14).

Willis, Wilkie, and Gracey (2012) conducted an assessment of the written communication skills of 620 college juniors and seniors at a Western Pennsylvania university. The authors used the Competent Language Usage Essentials (C.L.U.E.) diagnostic test to evaluate students' ability with regard to grammar, mechanics, confusing words, spelling, and sentence structure. The results of the study showed that overall C.L.U.E. and grammar scores had decreased over a four-year period. Also, the analysis of data confirmed several indicators of a decline in writing literacy among college students.

A definite imbalance exists between the number of organizations seeking soft skills in new hires and the number of individuals who possess these competencies. Dana, Hancock, and Phillips (2011) defined soft skills as communication skills, critical thinking, reasoning, problem solving, and written communication. A misconception exists that students learn soft skills in an English course and are able to retain them in their bank of knowledge. In contrast, these abilities are learned through practice.

Writing intensive courses provide a means of addressing declining student writing proficiency. These courses use various types of writing assignments to promote deeper understanding of the course content. The goals are to develop students as good writers by linking their writing proficiency with their desire to learn more about the field of study, engage in emerging issues/questions in the discipline, and have students become participants in academic discourse (Ahlawat, Miller, & Shahid, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

This article describes how to create and assess a writing-intensive class for business majors based on established learning goals for the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) Degree Program at one AACSB International accredited regional comprehensive university.

Answers to the following questions will be provided:

1. How should a writing-intensive course be linked to overall learning goals for a degree program?
2. What elements should be included in a writing-intensive course to accomplish learning goals and student learning outcomes?
3. What are assessment measures that can be used to evaluate student performance and how can they be linked to overall learning goals?

Establishing Learning Goals for the Business Degree Program

To meet AACSB International standards, faculty members created Learning Goals for the Bachelor of Business Administration Degree Program. These learning goals include:

1. Integrate, Analyze, and Apply Business Knowledge—To be a cross-disciplinary critical thinker
 - a. To integrate knowledge across the functional areas of business to solve problems.
 - b. To use elements of reasoning to analyze and solve problems.
 - c. To apply intellectual standards to evaluate solutions to problems specific to a major discipline area
2. Communicate—To be a successful communicator
 - a. To write analytical reports using appropriate technologies
 - b. To create and deliver oral analytical presentations using appropriate technologies
3. Develop Ethical Awareness—To be an ethically responsible employee/business leader
 - a. To identify an ethical dilemma
 - b. To use an ethical framework for analyzing ethical issues
4. Understand a Profession—To prepare for transition into careers
 - a. To demonstrate team skills
 - b. To recognize and examine diverse points of view
 - c. To compare and contrast business practices in the global workplace

Creating a Business Writing Intensive Class

Based on the learning goals established for the BBA Degree, business communication faculty members designed Student Learning Objectives for the writing-intensive business communication course. After completing this course, students should have met the following objectives:

1. Explain the role of business communication in decision making.
2. Compare and contrast strategies for communicating effectively within an organization.
3. Differentiate communication principles for effective written documents integrating appropriate technical skills.

4. Apply and adapt the research process in solving problems and thinking critically.
5. Recognize and analyze the ethical issues within organizations and the importance of choices and the consequences to the decision makers.
6. Experience and realize the dynamics of working as a member of a team to successfully accomplish a common objective.
7. Demonstrate effective communication principles for oral presentations using appropriate technology.
8. Evaluate the impact of cultural diversity on the communication process.

To accomplish these objectives, students complete an individually written formal analytical report based on individual interviews with business executives and compiled with other team members' data; a team business presentation based on the compiled data; written reports including a short report, memorandum report, email report, and business letter; a grammar/punctuation standard practices exam; and midterm and final exams.

Assessing Learning Goals in a Writing-Intensive Class

The students' performance in the business writing-intensive class is assessed and evaluated by the instructors, students, and external reviewers.

Instructors' assessment

All assignments are evaluated by the instructor based on critical thinking elements of reasoning: purpose, question, assumptions, point of view, information/data, concepts, inferences, and implications. The reasoning used for the assignment is evaluated through the standards of: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth/breadth, logic, significance, and formatting. The strategic and non-verbal impact of each document is assessed through the organization/strategic outline, tone or message, and formatting as illustrated in Table 1 (Appendix).

Students' assessment

Students complete an online assessment of the writing-intensive course at the end of each semester. The survey was designed to assess the course learning objectives and the BBA Learning Goals. Categories of questions in the online assessment and their related learning goals are indicated in Table 2 (Appendix).

Students also review the work of their fellow students and teammates. Each student evaluates the performance of other members on their team for the analytical written and oral report. Students are encouraged to take their roles seriously to ensure accountability standards for their team projects.

External reviewers

Students in the business writing-intensive class interview two executives. These executives are sent an online survey to evaluate the student interviewer's preparation, interview skills, communication skills, professionalism, and follow-up skills as shown in Table 3 (Appendix). The survey results from business leaders provide valuable information to faculty regarding what necessary changes may be needed in classroom instruction. External reviewers

are also invited to evaluate the oral presentations. Their evaluations add a dimension of real-world credibility to the assignment, and students respond well to this added assessment measure.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students need classes that focus on developing writing skills. For business communication faculty members to maximize the value of their courses to business programs, they should demonstrate the important relationship between achieving learning goals for a degree program and the student learning objectives for a business writing-intensive class.

Multiple assessment measures should be used including those of the instructor, students, and external evaluators. The results of these assessments should be used to tweak the course and make course revisions that will improve students' writing skills and enhance their performance in the workplace.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Checklist for Evaluating Critical Thinking as Reflected Through Written Communication

Reasonable Thinking				
	0,1 (F,D)	2 (C)	3 (B)	4 (A)
<u>Purpose</u>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clearly identifies the main purpose of the document (must be realistic and relevant) ● Establishes the context 				
<u>Question</u>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Precisely addresses the question at issue ● Addresses sub-questions 				
<u>Assumptions</u>				
Identifies/acknowledges assumptions and whether they are justified				
<u>Point of View</u>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflects fair evaluation of others' points of view ● Adapts to a specific audience ● States and substantiates the writer's beliefs 				
<u>Data</u>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Presents sufficient data/information/ evidence to support the conclusion/ answer ● Reviews both supporting and opposing data 				
<u>Concepts, Ideas, and Principles</u>				
Identifies and evaluates key & alternative concepts with precision				
<u>Inferences, Interpretation, and Conclusion</u>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identifies the most important conclusion ● Bases conclusion only on evidence and checks for consistency 				
<u>Implications/Consequences</u>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follows logically from the reasoning ● States logical outcomes and anticipates unexpected outcomes, which may be negative/positive 				

The Strategic and Non-Verbal Impact of a Document

	0,1 (F,D)	2 (C)	3 (B)	4 (A)
<u>Organization and Strategic Outline</u>	—	—	—	—
Follows appropriate outline (direct, indirect)				
<u>Tone or Candor of Message</u>	—	—	—	—
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Avoids unintended messages ● Considers the added message - not only what was said but what was implied ● Reflects professional courtesy, particularly the "you viewpoint" 				
<u>Formatting</u>	—	—	—	—
Follows standard format/spacing rules				
Total (12 points possible)	—	—	—	—

Note: A = Manager Could Use/Mail As Is B = Revise (Tweak) & Use
 C = Revise Major Portions D = Does not meet the criteria

Table 2
BBA Learning Goals and Course Student Learning Objective

BBA Learning Goal	Course Student Learning Objective
Integrate, Analyze, and Apply Business Knowledge	Research Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify topic ● Compare knowledge ● Recognize peer-reviewed and scholarly sources ● Read background sources ● Use credible references Critical Thinking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Seek and value different viewpoints ● Identify purpose of research ● Identify strategy for target audience ● Analyze assumptions in reading/writing ● Analyze data to form conclusions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form recommendations based on conclusions
Communicate	<p>Writing Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop/refine research questions Plan, create, and revise paper Use APA formatting and referencing Explain the meaning of graphs, charts, and numerical data in writing <p>Communication Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use multimedia to prepare and deliver business presentation Create an oral presentation from a written report Summarize the main ideas and research findings Express the importance and relevance of the findings
Develop Ethical Awareness	<p>Ethical Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quote sources and paraphrase correctly Realize the importance of avoiding misleading results Understand plagiarism and its importance and consequences
Understand a Profession	<p>Peer-Review Process in Teamwork</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role as a team member Importance of writing to career Accountability in the workplace

Table 3
Professional Skills Expectation

Professional Skill	Failed to, Met, or Exceeded Expectation for Entry-level Employee
<p>Telephoning to Schedule the Interview...The student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> used appropriate telephone protocol during the phone call to schedule the interview scheduled the interview with adequate advance notice spoke professionally, articulately, and with expression 	

<p>Arriving for the Interview...The student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ arrived on time or slightly early ▪ dressed appropriately in interview attire ▪ greeted me professionally and confidently ▪ demonstrated professional handshake ▪ maintained eye contact ▪ used good posture ▪ expressed thanks during the greeting 	
<p>Conducting the Interview...The student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ used appropriate non-verbal communication without distractions ▪ demonstrated friendliness, was relaxed yet professional ▪ carried on a pleasant conversation ▪ stayed focused on completing the questionnaire ▪ paced questions appropriately ▪ concluded interview with thanks ▪ followed the cue to leave ▪ left promptly 	
<p>Following the Interview...The student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sent a thank-you email within a few days ▪ paid attention to detail and accuracy in letter 	

