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Learning to Write and Writing to Learn Social Work Concepts: Application of Writing Across the Curriculum Strategies and Techniques to a Course for Undergraduate Social Work Students

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Although writing is of great importance to effective social work practice, many students entering social work education programs experience serious academic difficulties related to writing effectively and thinking critically. The purpose of this article is to present an introductory social work course that integrates Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogical strategies into the social work curriculum. A brief description of Writing Across the Curriculum is provided, and teaching techniques used in the course, including reading and writing assignments, classroom writing instruction, testing, peer review, writing consultation, and grading rubrics, are described in detail.

KEYWORDS social work education, Writing Across the Curriculum, critical thinking, writing skills

Effective written communication is essential to social work practice (Alter & Adkins, 2006; Knight, 1997; Rompf, 1995; Simon & Soven, 1990). In the current practice environment of budget cuts and managed care, unclear documentation of clients' progress toward their established goals may result in

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an insurer's decision to withhold or even deny payment for services (Waller, 2000). In addition, social workers must be able to express their professional judgments clearly and convincingly in writing to law enforcement personnel, funders, and policymakers to ensure the well-being of their clients (Alter & Adkins, 2006). Unclear writing can result in inappropriate placements or denial of services. Therefore, it is crucial that social workers state clearly their recommendations for a child's foster care placement or return to the family, legal guardianship issues, reasons for involuntary commitment to substance abuse or mental health treatment, and many other decisions that can profoundly affect their clients' lives.

Although writing is of great importance to effective social work practice, students entering a social work education program may not come into the program prepared to write effectively. Adler and Adkins (2001) noted a decline in writing ability among social work students. These researchers indicated that "students appear to be unable to explore issues with depth and complexity, to organize material in a coherent manner with full development and detail, and to write with control over diction, syntactic variety, and transition" (p. 493). Given our teaching experiences, we completely agree with Adler and Adkins (2001) concerning their assessment of student writing. However, in addition to the problems that they mentioned, we have noticed serious problems with grammar, punctuation, and usage errors (especially among our students who speak English as a second or even third language) that frequently render assignments virtually incomprehensible. Many of these students nevertheless are uniquely qualified to work with clients in the field because of their life experiences and a genuine and intense desire to help people.

As gatekeepers to the social work practice community, we felt that given the curriculum within which we were working, we were placed in the position of allowing someone to enter the field with inadequate communication and thinking skills or of screening out enthusiastic students who would make excellent social workers if they just had better writing and thinking skills. Neither of these options was acceptable to us, and with the cooperation and support of the Florida Atlantic University (FAU) Center for Excellence in Writing, we developed an introductory social work course that all undergraduate social work majors must pass before they enter practice courses and progress to field internship and graduation. This introductory course is Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), through which students develop their writing and critical thinking skills as they learn about the field of social work. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the process involved in the integration of WAC techniques and pedagogical methods in this introductory social work class. We begin with a brief description of the WAC movement, and provide some background on the development of the course. Then we discuss the structure of the course, including reading assignments, writing assignments, and testing. In addition,

we describe in detail the teaching techniques used in the course—classroom writing instruction, writing consultation, revision, peer review, and grading rubrics.

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

WAC is a pedagogical reform movement that emerged in higher education in the United States in the mid 1970s (McLeod & Maimon, 2000). The fundamental assumption of the WAC movement is that writing can be used not only as a way to deliver a message that one wants to communicate, but also as a means of learning and developing critical thinking (Bean, 2001). McLeod and Maimon (2000) explained that the purpose of a WAC writing assignment is as follows:

> . . . to use writing as a tool for learning rather than a test of that learning, to have writers explain concepts or ideas to themselves, to ask questions, to make connections, to speculate, to engage in critical thinking and problem solving. (p. 579)

To foster critical thinking, assignments are designed so that there are no clear-cut answers, thus encouraging students to discuss various supported points of view within the topic (Bean, 2001). It is understood that as students learn course concepts through the writing process, they also are refining their writing skills to meet the expectations of their profession.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE

Discussion among faculty of the School of Social Work at FAU concerning the inadequacy of writing skills frequently found among undergraduate students resulted in the development of a three-credit introductory course to be required for all students entering our bachelor of social work program. The course intends to emphasize the importance of writing and critical thinking while introducing social work ethics, the generalist intervention model, and various practice areas provided by social workers in the field. Three faculty members agreed to develop and teach the course. After taking a 3-day WAC workshop provided by the FAU Center for Excellence in Writing, they began the process of developing a syllabus that would fulfill the university WAC guidelines for such classes. The course was approved as a WAC course by the university WAC committee and was introduced into the curriculum in the fall of 2007.

Four sections of the course were taught the first semester, and multiple sections of the course have been offered each semester since then.

Enrollment in the course is limited to 20 students in each section. During the semester, the faculty members teaching the course meet two to three times to discuss problems and successes they have noted. In addition, students' feedback concerning the course is solicited at the end of each semester using a questionnaire developed by the instructors. The questionnaire, which is based on the Student Assessment of Learning Gains instrument (Seymour, Wiese, Hunter, & Daffinrud, 2000), asks for students' satisfaction with and suggestions for the course. Information from those questionnaires, as well as the instructor meetings during the semester, have resulted in changes in the course over time as we have refined the elements.

Appendix A shows the WAC guidelines that pertain to assignment structure and how our course meets those requirements. Two graded writing assignments are structured to challenge the students' writing and critical thinking skills as they learn about social work and social welfare concepts and ethics. The writing assignments are worth 50% of the students' grade. The remaining 50% comes from weekly quizzes that encourage students to keep up with their reading assignments (10%), and two multiple choice and brief essay exams testing students' understanding of course materials (20% each). The students are expected to turn in multiple drafts of their papers, revising their work on the basis of instructor feedback. This revision process is vital to the class, and we describe it more fully in the subsequent section. The multiple drafts of the two assignments result in students generally writing a total of about 6,000 words during the semester. However, the number of words is not important in these assignments. Rather, the emphasis is on the analysis of course concepts as they are applied to the case study, as well as the organization, readability, and professionalism of the students' writing.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COURSE

Although this course is unusual (in its emphasis on writing), in other ways it is traditional. The instructors use a lecture format for most classes and incorporate videos and other teaching aids as appropriate. A student-centered, problem-based learning approach is used for the lectures and class activities (Allen, Duch, & Grob, 1996). In accordance with the problem-based learning model, student-centered learning makes the class relevant to the students by allowing them to determine at least some of the goals of the class, thus encouraging them to take explicit responsibility for their own learning and improving their motivation to learn. In this class, students are allowed to determine which of the chapters concerning the various services provided by social workers in the field they want to study. This allows students who are particularly interested, for example, in school social work, disabilities, or gay and lesbian services, to learn about that area, while not being required to read about other practice areas that hold less interest. In contrast, the

course is also problem based in that it presents students with real-world challenges by asking them to apply course concepts to case studies similar to cases that they may encounter in the field.

Testing

Brief quizzes are given at the beginning of most classes testing the students on concepts contained in their assigned readings for that class. The purpose of these quizzes is to encourage students to stay current with their reading as they go through the semester, rather than focusing exclusively on their writing assignments. A midterm and a cumulative final exam then test the students in more detail on the information in their assigned readings, videos, and other classroom activities.

Reading Assignments

Weekly readings from an introductory social work textbook, and from the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010) are assigned. In classes before the midterm exam, students learn about the history of social work and social welfare, the generalist intervention model, and social work ethics. The information in these classes, and the readings associated with them, are the foundation for both writing assignments. After the midterm exam, students are introduced to the various fields of practice (e.g., families, disabilities, substance abuse, delinquency) that may be of interest to them.

Classroom Writing Instruction

In general, the last 45 min of the 2-hr, 50-min classes are devoted to improving writing skills and addressing problems students are having with their paper revisions. These segments may include instruction on APA formatting, specifics about what should be included in the various parts of the paper, and/or review by instructor or peers of writing samples provided by students in the class. In addition, students are encouraged to ask questions about problems they are experiencing as they write their papers, so that all the students can learn from their peers.

Writing Consultation with Instructor

In addition to the regular writing segments, one full class period is devoted to a face-to-face writing consultation with the instructor. Before this consultation, students are instructed to highlight where essential elements are located. Some of these elements include (a) purpose statement, importance

of topic, thesis, and organizational statements in the introduction; (b) definitions, claims, evidence, and counter claims in the body; (c) restatement of purpose, importance, key findings, and implications in the conclusion; and (d) adequate APA formatting on title, reference page, and in-text citation and quoting. Students bring their papers, with the elements clearly identified, to the instructor during one class period, and the instructor critiques them and makes suggestions about needed revisions. Students then revise their paper and turn in their final draft in subsequent weeks.

Writing Assignments

To encourage the students to address any problems in their grammar and punctuation, online writing exercises are assigned weekly until the final draft of the first paper is due. Students are shown how to access the exercises on the Purdue University On-line Writing Lab Web site (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl) and then are expected to complete the assignments, grade them for their own information, and turn them in. They do not receive a grade from the instructor on the exercises even if they should fail. Requiring students to do these exercises allows students with grammar and punctuations problems to determine how much remedial work they need in order to write acceptable papers. (The Purdue site also has numerous exercises that we do not assign, such as the use of appositives, commas vs. semicolons, and prepositions of direction and location.) Students who are having difficulty with grammatical and/or punctuation issues not covered in the assigned exercises are encouraged to use the resources available to them through the site.

Two papers are required in the course. The first paper, designed to encourage critical thinking as well as challenge their writing abilities, asks students (a) to read an explanation of the residual (conservative), institutional (liberal), and person-in-environment perspectives of the provision of social welfare services; and (b) to discuss these concepts in the context of a case study from a video shown in class (Harmon & Kern, 2002). To help the students understand how to write in an organized and professional manner, the instructors divide this paper into three section: (a) title page, abstract, and introduction; (b) body; and (c) conclusion, reference page, and abstract—with substantive feedback given on each section.

In the second writing assignment, students must read a journal article concerning boundary issues in social work practice. The article that we used is Reamer's (2003) "Boundary Issues in Social Work: Managing Dual Relationships," which discusses five central themes in dual relationships that must be understood to avoid ethical and legal problems when working with clients. Students are given a case study that includes numerous actions by the social worker that are exemplary of Reamer's five themes. Students are then asked to determine which boundaries a social worker has crossed

or violated, to justify their decision about whether the action constitutes a crossing or violation, and to discuss how the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics would view these crossings.

It should be noted that great care is taken in scheduling the due dates for writing assignments and course exams. One of the biggest challenges faced by instructors and students taking the course is time management. The class is not only writing intensive but also grading intensive. That is, there must be sufficient time for students to read course materials, write drafts and revisions, and study for midterm and final exams. This course is frequently the first that students have taken in their upper division classes, and many of them have never experienced this level of specificity and complexity in their assignments. In addition, there must be sufficient time for the instructor to grade and provide substantive feedback on students' written work. Therefore, we attempt to structure the class so that students can learn how to manage their time as the semester proceeds, and so that the instructors are not overwhelmed with the grading process.

Revision

The revision demand is meant to demonstrate the importance of writing as a process (Bean, 2001). As students review and rewrite their papers, they have the opportunity to reflect on the content that they have included, to refine their arguments, and to improve their ability to communicate their ideas through writing. A detailed grading rubric (developed by the instructors) is given to the students during the first class of the semester (see the subsequent section for more detailed information concerning the rubric, and see Appendix B for the rubric itself). Students are then expected to refer back to the rubric throughout the semester as they write their drafts. For the first writing assignment, students submit first drafts of individual sections—introduction, argument, and conclusion/abstract/references—over a period of about 5 weeks. Each section is reviewed by the instructor as it is completed, and returned with substantive feedback. Students then assemble their revised sections into a final draft that is returned to them graded with additional substantive feedback intended to help them with their second paper. This feedback is presented to them on a grading rubric form so that they know exactly where their problem areas are. Dividing the paper into sections is helpful because it makes it possible to identify problematic purpose, thesis, and organizational statements and to correct the focus of the paper at the beginning of the writing process.

The process is more complex for the second paper. Instead of dividing the paper into sections, students write the entire paper before submitting any part of it. The first draft is discussed in class, and students examine each section of their papers for compliance with the requirements contained in a grading rubric. The papers then are exchanged among peers so that

they can receive further feedback. Students take this feedback and revise their papers in preparation for a one-on-one consultation session with the instructor. During this session, students receive additional comments from the instructor, and revise their papers once again. They bring the third, and final, revision to class the following week and submit it for a final grade.

One of the most important elements of the writing and revision process is the identification of the individual elements of the paper as they appear within the text, using Toulmin's (1958) method as described by Crusius and Channell (2000). Students are first shown how to identify the elements by projecting the first two pages of their article on boundaries and dual relationships on an overhead. The thesis and importance statements are identified, and several claims (with their supporting evidence) are marked and discussed. Students then are instructed to use their grading rubric as they underline or highlight each required element of their own introduction (purpose, importance, thesis, and organizational statements), writing which element they have identified in the margin. They also must identify every claim that they make within the body of the paper, and the evidence that they use to support their claims. This technique allows students to become conscious of all the required elements and encourages them to consider whether they have included them in their papers. In addition, it assists the instructor in finding the elements for grading purposes.

Rubrics

The rubric used for grading the writing assignments is presented in Appendix B. A rubric is used in this class as a tool for both grading and teaching. The use of rubrics for grading scientific papers has gained popularity in recent years (Bean, 2001; Oliver-Hoyo, 2003). The rubric developed for this class is provided to students during the first class of the semester. Students are shown how to use it as they write their papers so that they can fulfill the requirements contained in it and produce clearly and concisely written work. We then use it to point out errors in the students' initial and final drafts, and to clearly justify the grade that is given.

The rubric used in this class was developed by the three instructors. It is a checklist that includes sections for the abstract; introduction; body; conclusion of the paper; required APA references and manuscript elements; and writing, grammar, and editorial style. It is a detailed tool that informs students about which elements each section must include (e.g., purpose, importance, thesis, and organizational statements in the introduction) and exactly which APA formatting requirements they need to be aware of (e.g., indentation, margins, page numbers, reference page requirements). The most common grammatical and punctuation errors turned in by our students are also listed in the rubric (e.g., agreement of pronoun and antecedent, agreement of subject and verb, run-on sentences, sentence fragments). One significant

advantage to using this rubric is that when students finish this introductory class successfully, they can use the rubric as they write papers in the future.

Peer Review

Peer review is another tool used in this course in which students evaluate their peers' writing as a way of helping them evaluate their own writing. Although there is nothing currently in the literature concerning the use of peer review in social work or other social sciences, it has been used successfully in molecular science classes (Russell, Chapman, & Wegner, 1998).

In this class, peer review takes two different forms. As noted, a peer review is done early in the semester; students trade papers with each other in class and then use the grading rubric to make comments on their peers' work. This is a powerful exercise because students are told before they begin writing the first draft that they will share their papers with their peers. They seem to take a great deal of care with writing that they understand will be read by someone other than their instructor. Then, because they work hard on the initial draft, their later drafts benefit from their early attention to, and compliance with, the rubric.

Another form of peer review occurs during the semester when the instructors take excerpts from early drafts of students' papers (that illustrate common problems being turned in by the students) and place them into a mock paper. The mock paper is presented on an overhead during class, and students use their rubrics to determine if all necessary elements are included. The mock paper is reviewed two to three times before the final draft of the paper is due, each review focusing on a different aspect of the paper.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to provide an overview of the process involved in the integration of WAC techniques and pedagogical methods in an introductory undergraduate social work class developed in the FAU School of Social Work as a required writing-intensive WAC course. We are currently in the process of evaluating students' perceptions of the WAC program, the results of which we believe will give us empirical evidence supporting our anecdotal impressions of success. We are encouraged by students' excitement about their increasing writing and thinking skills as they progress through the semester—especially the students who have entered the class with significant writing deficits—and by unsolicited positive comments from faculty in the department who have these same students later in courses. Our experience has made it clear to us that social work faculty are capable of teaching writing in their classes and that the teaching of writing enhances critical thinking and written communication skills. Our

intention is (a) to develop a manual that includes implementation criteria, lecture materials, writing assignments, and grading rubrics and (b) to share our research with interested faculty in future publications. We hope that our experience helps other schools and educators develop courses that improve their students' skills and ultimately improve the quality of care and services they provide to their clients.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Writing Across the Curriculum Course Guidelines and Elements of the Introductory Social Work Course Meeting Those Guidelines

Writing Across the Curriculum guidelines for equivalent course	Introductory social work course
1. Include at least two graded writing assignments that engage students in intellectual activities central to course objectives	• One 5–7 double-spaced page critical thinking paper concerning the residual, institutional, and person-in-environment perspectives of social work as they apply to a case study • One 7–10 double-spaced page paper concerning social work ethics based on a case study • 2 multiple choice and short essay exams • 8–10 quizzes on course readings
2. Count writing assignments for at least 50% of the course grade	• Critical thinking paper 15% • Ethics paper 35% • Exams 40% • Quizzes 10% • Total 100%
3. Provide a schedule for writing assignments that allocates class time for discussing strategies to improve student writing	• Last 45 min of each class is devoted to discussing writing strategies and techniques
4. Require students to make substantial revision of at least one graded assignment	• Critical thinking paper revised once • Ethics paper revised multiple times
5. Include substantive feedback from the instructor on all writing assignments	• Instructor provides substantive feedback on all drafts of both papers • Students review peer writing during class
6. Require each student to write a target of 5,000 (± 1,000) words	• Critical thinking paper first draft @ 1,200 words, final draft @ 1,200 words = 2,400 words • Ethics paper drafts @ 1,800 words, final draft @ 1,800 words = 3,600 words Total word count @ 6,000 words

APPENDIX B

Student:			Score:	
Requirement	Rating key: – Unsatisfactory + Satisfactory ++ Outstanding			
Abstract			APA writing/grammar/editorial style	
Purpose			Transitions	
Key points			Tense	
Conclusion (findings)			Conciseness (no wordiness/redundancy)	
Importance (of findings)			Sentence/paragraph length	
Opening of the body			Word choice	
Purpose			Spelling	
Importance of the topic			Pronoun/antecedent agreement	
Key definitions provided			No colloquial expressions	
Thesis statement			Subject/verb agreement	
Organizational statement			Complete sentences	
Body (argument)				
Key definitions provided			Punctuation	
Terminology used correctly			Commas after introductory elements	
Claims			Commas after items in a list	
Evidence			Commas to set off nonessential items	
Analysis, explanation			Compound sentences (no run-on/fused)	
Counterargument and rebuttal			Colon(s)	
Material from other sources			Semicolon(s)	
Quotations			No unnecessary commas	
Paraphrases			Apostrophes	
Credible. Relevant sources cited			Quotation marks	
Credit given			Capitalization	
Conclusion of the body			Italics	
Conclusion (findings)			Numbers	
Key points revisited				
Importance (of the findings)				
APA reference/manuscript			Comments:	
Title page				
Required items				
No unnecessary items				
Capitalization				
Citations in paper				
Font, spacing				
Indentation, margins				
Headings				
Reference page				
Required items				
Capitalization				
Italics				
Alphabetization				
Page headers				

Figure B1. Grading Rubric.