

Writing Lab for Opus College of Business Full-time MBA Program

Initial Report and Recommendations for the MBA program compiled by Fernando Sanchez, Department of English, University of Saint Thomas

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Section 1. Background

1-1 Original Concept

- Offer a full-year writing practice that is closely integrated with the other core courses
• No "busy work" stand alone assignments of little value
• To be offered as part of "Professional Fridays" along with verbal lab and leader lab
• Communication labs (writing and verbal) meet 5 times a semester; the first 3 meetings occur on the first 3 Fridays of the fall semester and during 1 week of J-term. This allows labs to "front load" the concept and skills that will be applied through the course of the semester The final 2 meetings occur later in the semester and are focused on application of the concepts and skills to specific assignment

1-2 Problems

- Integrating writing lab with core courses has become increasingly difficult
o Course instructor changes and MBA program changes/redesign have exacerbated this
• Successful integration requires an assignment that applies business writing criteria and allows time for polishing and refining the writing

Table with 2 columns: Courses, Fall Semester, Spring Semester. Lists various business courses for each semester and includes a note about collaborative partnerships.

Section 2. Frustrations Encountered (By theme)

2-1. Inconsistency/contradiction

- a. Students receive detailed assignment rubrics from instructors and interpret them as writing outlines and tend to follow them to the letter, creating conflict with the guidance from the writing instructor
- b. Evolution of Career Services office and changes in services provided for students have presented challenges in coming up with collaborative assignments

2-2. Lack of communication

- a. When writing assignments are based on course deliverables (e.g., a research report for statistics class) and deliverables change (e.g., due date changes or changes in the content of the deliverable) this has a downstream effect on writing assignment
- b. Course instructors and writing lab instructor are sometimes not in sync, leading to students preparing one version of the assignment for the writing instructor and another for course instructor. This creates student dissatisfaction with having to “do an assignment twice”

2-3. Lack of priority for writing

- a. In-class writing assignments difficult to pull off effectively, given limited contact hours (90 minutes per session); hard to present concepts and skills and do substantial graded work within the 90 minute time frame—additional out-of-class assignments adds to student workload which is already high during the first year
- b. Credit weight of the writing lab (1.5 credits) vs. core course (3 credits) means that if students have to make tradeoffs, writing lab is the course that is sacrificed

Section 3. Addressing the Issues/ Recommendations

3-1. Keeping the Current Structure

The current setup makes a lot of pedagogical sense. Teaching writing works best when students are exposed to immediate, real-world circumstances. Although separating the writing lab from content courses would help to eliminate some of the problems in the previous section (Particularly Sections 2-1 and 2-2), it may actually exacerbate some of the frustrations surrounding students' seeming lack of priority for writing in Section 2-3. However, most of the restructuring of the course would have to come administratively.

a. Stable and Authorized Staffing

Because the writing instructor in this position will have to carry out many administrative functions (coordinating with instructors across courses; developing and implementing writing curricula for students from different courses; assessing and evaluating programmatic goals and changes), it is highly recommended that the instructor be hired as a full time instructor and carry a full time designation such as lecturer, clinical faculty, etc. According to the Council of Writing Program Administrator's Portland Resolution, "WPA positions should carry sufficient stability and continuity to allow for the development of sound educational programs and planning. The WPA should be a regular, full-time, tenured faculty member or a full-time administrator with a recognizable title that delineates the scope of the position." A full time designation would help keep a consistent channel of communication open between the writing instructor and all of the different courses that include a writing lab component. The writing instructor should also have more weight and authority to suggest and implement changes. One thing that is apparent is that the writing instructor is very reactionary and the work is often dictated by what happens in the larger-credit-bearing courses. The writing instructor should be able to work more closely with these content instructors on a regular basis (not just once the semester starts) and coordinate with these different areas or even propose recommendations for due dates and guidelines that are based on writing pedagogy. As an adjunct may leave due to pay or benefits issues, it would be good to build some permanence and authority in this role.

If the position must remain an adjunct position, then a tenured faculty member with interest or experience in writing pedagogy should oversee the writing lab component in order to facilitate an integrated experience for students enrolled in these paired courses. The adjunct writing instructor would be responsible (and compensated) for submitting a semester (or year) review, which highlights any issues that developed over the course of the semester and suggestions for mitigating them. The tenured faculty member would make the necessary recommendations or find ways of mitigating the issues before they grew to become untenable.

b. Responsibilities

Whether the writing lab is directly overseen by an adjunct who reports to a full time writing instructor or a tenured faculty member, it is highly recommended that more time be spend by whoever is directly teaching the writing lab be in close coordinated contact with content instructors. In many of the points that the previous instructor reported (See Section 2), it seems like students feel a tension between accomplishing the requirements for both classes, with writing frequently being seen as “extra work.” More should be done to get students to see that the two courses are tied together and each is necessary for students to succeed. This means compensating the instructors for meetings prior to the start of the semester where they

i. devise rubrics or discuss rubrics together and discuss their priorities.

This will help mitigate the lack of communication problem reported in Section 2-1(a). It is understandable that instructors will have different goals for students when they ask them to write an assignment. If both instructors know the criteria that each will have for the assignment, it becomes easier to collaborate on ways to talk about rubrics to students and emphasize that they are not merely checklists. Content instructors and the writing instructor should also prepare students to expect a new (equally important) rubric from the partnered instructor.

ii. plan out “troubleshooting” and “problem solving” methods for tackling students’ most common complaints.

It cannot be solely the writing instructor’s responsibility to emphasize the importance of writing. The content instructors should be involved in emphasizing the importance of remediating their assignments to break students’ misconceptions that there is only one audience in professional settings. Something as simple as having the content person talk about audience awareness would go a long way in having students realize that it’s not the writing instructor who is demanding a new assignment but the circumstances that are requiring a new tone, or new information to be included. The hope is that students would not see their work as “doing an assignment twice” but rather see it as refining their ideas.

3-2. Other structures

Other structures can be incorporated but they depend on the types of writing skills that the department and the program and the writing lab instructor agree is necessary for students to gain. Writing courses at the graduate level for business students. Some writing components focus on basic grammar and stylistic concerns through writing workshops (Bogert 1996; Thomas and Hardy 2005; May, Thompson and Hebblethwaite, 2012), others on problem-solving and audience-driven considerations (Seifert, 2009), and others on how to write ethically (Conn

2008). Below, I have listed some possible structures that might work in this context, but, again, it these are dependent on the goals.

a. Graduate Instructors

We had discussed staffing the course with graduate level writing students from English. Unfortunately, for accreditation reasons, this is not a possibility. The Official Higher Learning Commission has stated that

“Faculty teaching in higher education institutions should have completed a program of study in the discipline or subfield* (as applicable) in which they teach, and/or for which they develop curricula, with coursework *at least one level above that of the courses being taught* or developed. Completion of a degree in a specific field enhances an instructor’s depth of subject matter knowledge and is easily identifiable.” (p. 3, emphasis added)

As we only have a Master’s Level program, none of our graduate level students would be qualified to teach MBA students.

b. Three-Credit Course

If it’s possible, extending the writing lab to three credits can be helpful. More time could be spent practicing more with writing concepts (depending on the goals of the writing instructor and the department/program) and conferencing with students and giving them in-depth feedback on their writing, so that the relationship felt less transactional.

c. Writing and Revising Seminar

Students could be asked to take a writing lab *after* they have completed one of the designated content courses. In the writing lab (whether it is 1.5 or 3 credits), students would workshop their completed projects from a previous semester and remediate them for whatever audience was appropriate and apply writing concepts that the instructor and the department/program thought was essential for their majors to understand. This would mitigate some of the logistical issues but also keep the assignments that students are working on relevant. In fact, because at least a few weeks would have passed, students may not be as attached to what they wrote and more willing to rework it and do more research to improve it.

d. Service Learning

If the lab is extended to be a three-credit course and is detached from the content courses, students could still get hands-on experience with writing if the course was designated as a service-learning/community engagement course. Many courses focus on writing instruction through the context of real-world application scenarios. Professional communication genres such as reports, memos, and emails are also taught because students will need to communicate directly and professionally with their

community partner. There are some logistical and administrative issues associated with this option that would need to be addressed quickly, however.

e. Cases

A way to mitigate logistical issues for a one credit course and still maintain a level of authenticity may be through assigning real-world case examples for students to practice their writing through. Students can either learn about a local organization and create relevant materials per the instructor's guidelines. They can also bring in and revise writing from their own employment experiences, but the instructor would have to make sure that the writing that students bring in conforms to the weeks' lessons.

3-3: Determining Priorities

Before determining a structure, it might make sense to let departmental and student needs determine how to best define the writing priorities (see, for instance, Lamonica, 2008). For example, writing course can focus on teaching style, tone, grammatical issues, organization & structure, group-writing, persuasive writing, cross-cultural communication, professional genres, technical writing, researching problem solving strategies for specific issues, etc. Additionally, determining how to rank and value these priorities may be a better indicator of the structure of the writing component.