

The Impact Of Writing Assignments In Business Education: Toward A Competitive Advantage In The Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century organizations are increasingly becoming global information networks where the emphasis on written communication is growing exponentially. Effective writing skills are becoming more essential to workplace success and thus a central focus in business programs across the country.

This article addresses writing issues in business education and how they relate to effective workplace writing. The article focuses on three essential factors - teaching writing to international students, faculty attitudes, and workplace writing and how each of these aid in producing students with the effective writing skills that add value to their potential employers.

Keywords: Workplace Writing; Faculty Attitudes; International Students

INTRODUCTION

 Effective writing skills are essential to workplace success and thus a central focus in business programs across the country, in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Employers are not only seeking candidates with superior analytical skills, but those who are able to articulate and summarize their findings in writing, both clearly and concisely. Moreover, students that graduate from college with superior writing skills will provide more value to the company, as well as project a better professional image (Lentz, 2013). Here, the author noted the wide disparity in the writing skills employers expected from recent graduates and their actual skills demonstrated in the workplace. Thus, the success or failure of any writing course can be more effectively judged by the students' performance in the workplace, rather than by their grade on a writing exam. As Schneider and Andre (2005) concluded, most of the skills taught in an average business writing class are based on what a student knows about a particular topic rather than the students' writing skills in drawing conclusions, making recommendations, and solving problems and thus is insufficient for effective workplace writing.

Mabrito (1997) pointed out that the classroom model for teaching business and professional writing has been adapted for English composition classes and ignores the business context in which the writing originates. In fact, one study has shown that many students feel that their preparation for workplace writing was insufficient. Schneider and Andre (2005) noted, in their research on university preparation for the workplace, that the students expected - but did not receive - adequate training to wrestle with the variety of writing tasks in the workplace. The students cited the need for more in-depth coverage of the extensive genres involved in workplace writing. The exposure to these different genres would give the students a clearer view and perspective on what type and level of writing skills would be expected of them in the workplace.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the current situation surrounding the relationship between university writing instruction and effective workplace writing. In addition, the article seeks to identify the critical issues and challenges of both academia and the workplace as it pertains to effective writing skills. Specifically, the paper is organized as follows: After this introduction, the article presents a literature review that covers some of the essential challenges surrounding teaching effective writing in both the university and the workplace. These issues

are: (1) the writing challenges of international students and those who teach these students, (2) the evolution of technology such as texting and how it affects writing skills, (3) faculty attitudes and teaching writing across the curriculum, and (4) teaching how to effectively write for the workplace. After the literature review, the article discusses the pedagogical implications of each of these issues, followed by the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the current literature involving the preparation of students for writing in the workplace from three different perspectives: (1) teaching writing to international students, (2) teaching workplace writing, and (3) faculty attitudes towards teaching writing.

International Students

As the U.S. population continues to grow, the effects of globalization become more apparent. With U.S. demographics projected to become drastically more diverse, the international student population in the colleges and universities is also expected to increase significantly (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). In a report on minority enrollment on U.S. campuses, Carnevale and Fry (2002) found that because of the constant in-flux of foreign students coming to the U.S., minority and international students - mostly African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islanders - are forecasted to account for 80 percent of the new college and university enrollees by the year 2015. Many of these students will be entering business programs and will likely make their way to various writing labs across college and university campuses to improve their business writing skills.

English language mechanics and organization are generally the factors utilized in assessing business writing in today's business schools. As Lewis, McGrew, and Adams (2002) noted, business communication instructors are continually being challenged by industry and business leaders to provide them with students who have the adequate writing skills, such as organization, tone, and the proper use of English language mechanics. Similarly, an article from National University (2014) pointed to a range of writing problems encountered by international students. The article points out that due to the lack of a basic vocabulary, many international students are unable to compose clear sentences. It further suggests that the students that have mastered these concepts still continue with errors such as the proper use of prepositions, articles, verb tenses, and idiomatic expressions. Sawir (2005) concurs in her article on the language difficulties of international students in Australia, noting that most of their problems were grounded in the lack of grammatical skills and thus should be the main focus in business writing courses. English language mechanics are not, however, the only factors to consider in assessing the writing abilities of international students.

Several studies suggest that the international students' errors in writing are more attributable to their cultural influences rather than mistakes in grammar, sentence structure, and organization. As Victor (1992) pointed out, the understanding of writing assignments can be understood from a high-context point of view, where the student does not follow rigid requirements, or from a low-context point of view, where requirements are explicit and concise. For example, a Japanese student (high-context) may follow the teacher's general guidelines for a writing assignment but would feel free to branch off in another direction. Conversely, a U.S. student (low-context) would most likely follow the instructions precisely. Hence, the Japanese student may have appeared to have lost focus, while the U.S. student was judged to be on-point. Another study Wang (1998) confirms these finding, noting that when teaching writing to international students, business education instructors must assist the students in understanding the writing expectations in the U.S. business environment. However, unlike U.S. students, international students' are in greater jeopardy of losing their cultural values in efforts to receive a more satisfactory letter grade on their writing assignments. A more recent study, Penrose (2005) noted the difficulty of responding to the distinctive writing needs and expectations of international graduate students, especially during unstructured writing assignments where cultural implications were apparent.

Workplace Writing

The rapid growth of technology and information sharing in today's organizations has increased the necessity for workplace writing. Twenty-first century organizations increasingly depend on information-sharing and effective communication to successfully run their companies. Hence, college and university graduates entering the

workforce with excellent communication skills - in particular, writing - will be a major asset to their future employers. As Lentz (2013) noted, students with superior writing skills are deemed more professional and thus add more value to the company than students with insufficient writing skills. However, the author further noted that even though there is an acute awareness and attention to writing instruction in both undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as the workplace, employers continue to complain about the deficient writing skills of new employees entering the workplace. Many employees feel overwhelmed with the writing requirements of their employers and, according to a study by Sapp and Zhang (2009), students' insufficient writing skills could negatively impact their future employment. Hence, several studies have been conducted in efforts to improve business writing from the college and university campus to the workplace.

In the past, most of the professional writing classes did not reflect the actual writing performed in the workplace (Mabrito, 1997). Several more recent studies, however, offer more realistic strategies aimed toward achieving adequate employee writing skills in the workplace. Smart, Hicks, and Melton (2012) found using problem-based scenarios to be effective in teaching workplace writing. The authors noted that rather than the writing assignments that exhibits to the instructor the general knowledge of the student, these scenarios teach students to write in a more realistic and professional context. Here, students can develop skills using actual company documents and, in this way, begin to develop critical thinking about the document's purpose. Similarly, Blakeslee (2001) found that classroom-workplace collaborations are essential to the learning process. Here, the author contends that even though the classroom does not offer the ideal climate to teach workplace writing, classroom-workplace collaborations do provide some amount of reality by working directly with actual organizations within the classroom setting.

Yet another study (Robbins, 2001) suggests weaving workplace writing into the English curriculum. The article found that one of the major difficulties that instructors encounter when teaching workplace writing is that students are too young to relate to the work experience. As the author notes, "In the same way that workplace documents support our work within schools and districts, they might be incorporated into the routines of our classrooms in ways that support teaching and learning. As a result, students will become acquainted with some of the fundamentals of workplace literacy as they use workplace documents to accomplish the work of English language arts" (p. 41).

Faculty Attitudes

Instructor commitment is crucial in order to successfully improve the writing proficiency of both undergraduate and graduate students in today's universities. Instructors need to be cognizant of the constant investments necessary to effectively teach a writing course, including providing a significant amount of time into giving feedback (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011). However, the authors pointed out that many graduate school instructors assume that students already write well before they enroll and that re-teaching is a waste of time. Nairn (2014) agrees, stating that many college ESL instructors consider addressing grammar in writing as ineffectual and boring. Even more glaring are the factors presented by Boice (1990) who found that faculty resisted incorporating writing into their courses because of the following drawbacks: (1) time spent on grading, (2) annoyance with errors in spelling and grammar, (3) frustration with reading papers without logical organization, (4) time spent investigating plagiarism, (5) trouble with subjective grading, (6) late submittals by students, (7) lack of confidence in own expertise as a writer, and (8) difficulty finding a way to make writing relevant. Another study by Stanton and Stanaland (2009) found that non-english faculty at one university assumed a very submissive role in writing instruction and were rarely available to students in off-class hours. In addition, here faculty comments did not focus on much more than basic grammatical and mechanical errors, with no opportunity for improvement. The faculty also did not indicate a desire for any type of cross-curriculum writing programs.

There are however, instructors that are fully committed and invested in improving students' writing and continue to help them improve as writers (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011). Focusing on teaching in graduate school, the authors found that teachers should be responsible to develop and guide students in their writing skills with the same intensity and focus they provide students in their research. They suggest that instructors focus on all aspects of writing, including grammar and punctuation, structure, and APA formatting. In addition, the authors cited that student investment and instructor commitment were key in successfully teaching students to write well.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Improving the Writing Skills of International Students

The effects of globalization in the U.S. have led to a greater international student presence in many of the colleges and universities across the country. When creating writing assignments, business communication faculty, as well as other writing instructors, must anticipate the writing challenges that many of these students bring to the table and develop a means of assessment to determine the individual needs of each student. As the literature has determined, some of the challenges are linked to cultural dynamics, while others are attributable to language mechanics. Thus, this process is essential to establishing a focus on predetermined student writing needs.

Undergraduate and graduate instructors cannot assume that international students arrive on campus with the Basic English language mechanics, grammatical, tone, and organizational skills necessary to be an effective business writer. Students may qualify and be hired because of their skills in their particular field, such as accounting or finance, but without sufficient grammatical skills, they will soon find themselves jobless. When addressing literacy training on the job, Halpert and Gundry (1991) stated that the basic writing challenges of employees in all levels of business are pushing industry leaders to create novel methods of on-the-job writing instruction. Here, the author points out those job applicants with adequate writing skills are reducing rapidly. Similarly, college and university faculty must emphasize the importance of grammar and language mechanics to their students. However, as presented in the literature review, these are not the only issues pertaining to challenges in international students' writing skills.

Since culture cannot be separated from communication, it must always be taken into account when teaching international and foreign students. Just as the international student must wrestle with his or her cultural identities, writing teachers must emphasize the organizational cultures of U.S. organizations to their students. This will be essential to their success. As Penrose (2005) found, assessing the particular needs of international students is a difficult, but necessary, venture that cannot be ignored. Whether it's language mechanics, grammar, culture, or, in some instances, a combination of both, strict attention must be given to these issues if students are expected to become effective writers. Therefore, if instructors can identify the writing problems and challenges up front, they will be in a better position to be effective teachers.

Teaching Workplace Writing in Contexts

The literature review confirms the importance of effective writing skills and how superior writing for the workplace is an essential asset that U.S. employers are seeking for their organizations. It's plain and simple - without sufficient writing skills for the workplace, there can be no success. In this sense, writing is the communication tool that helps an employee navigate throughout an organization. Thus, without sufficient writing skills, employees will have little chance for success because they will not be able to effectively communicate with fellow employees and customers. As this study points out, employers are seeking workers that add value to their organizations and, clearly, superior writing skills contribute to the overall worth of an organization. When workers are able to write effectively, it creates internal and external harmony by establishing positive connections within the organization and between its stakeholders. While the benefits of effective writing are numerous, the methods and environments to facilitate the instruction are in question.

However, because many students are not familiar with workplace environments, attempting to write according to particular industry genres is difficult. Thus, instructors need to develop ways to emulate corporate environments so that students become more aware of the situations and contexts of workplace activity.

Faculty Attitudes Towards Teaching Writing

Teachers are the commanding force in the classroom and their attitudes toward teaching are major factors in students' success. However, some research indicates a significant decline in the commitment of faculty to their students. One such study (Valadez & Anthony, 2001) cites an upward trend in the dependence on adjunct faculty members who have no long-term commitment to the institutions or its students. Indeed, when faculties have less

than desirable commitments to its students, learning outcomes suffer. For students to become more effective in the classroom, and thus more effective writers, teachers must fully commit to the students, the learning process, and the learning outcomes. Faculty who are committed better serve the students because of a trusting relationship between student and teacher. When a student believes that the instructor has his or her best interest in mind when teaching, the student becomes a better learner (writer) and buys into the learning process. For example, a criticism from the instructor about grammar usage on a student's paper is not taken negatively, but as a learning experience that will help him in the future. Another study (Crosswell, 2006) also confirms this study's finding that the expanding requirements and challenges of higher education are complex indeed and cite the quality of teaching and teacher adaptability as major components to becoming a successful teacher.

Students can only learn properly if they are taught properly. To teach writing effectively, the conventions of the English language and the grammatical and organizational components it entails must be mastered by the teacher before any attempt at teaching others and not doing so can lead to wasted time and energy for the teacher and the student. Institutions of higher learning must continue to invest in the best teachers available. Teachers must also be able adapt to the changing complexities of business writing in which they are able to assist students in navigating the different and changing genres within workplace and business writing.

CONCLUSION

Workplace writing has become a central component in twenty-first century organizations. So, how does this study on international students, workplace writing, faculty attitudes, and technology in writing help us understand the current situation surrounding the relationship between university writing instruction and effective business writing? Colleges and universities are tasked with preparing their students with the writing skills necessary to effectively communicate to their task holders, both internally and externally, and this study has identified four factors that contribute to a better understanding of the challenges that these educators face daily.

Given the rise of the international presence in our educational and workplace institutions, it is imperative that these students are sufficiently prepared to communicate effectively. Educators and business leaders need to consider holistic ways of training international students with their grammatical and English mechanics as well as the cultural challenges that may impede their learning process. This study has identified that a pre-assessment of international students' writing skills is essential to tackling the challenges cited in the discussion. The challenges of workplace writing are also apparent. Because many students are not familiar with workplace environments, it is important to utilize some of the innovative approaches to teaching workplace writing, such as workplace-classroom collaboration. Finally, educators must sustain a positive attitude toward teaching and their students and think of creative and innovative teaching methods to continually improve the learning outcomes of the students in becoming effective workplace writers.

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