

# Beyond Facebook™, Twitter™ and Texting: Writing in a Research University

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Achieving strong student writing outcomes at the university level results from a shift in university culture that is guided by dialogue at all levels in the university, engaging university administrators, department leaders, and faculty in the classroom. This article suggests reasons why students struggle with writing at the university, outlines steps to guide academic innovation, and offers an overview of practices that are positively correlated with stronger student writing outcomes.

Strong writing is a highly desired student outcome at the university level. Yet those outcomes are difficult to achieve despite our efforts. Faculty and administrators remain frustrated about students' weak writing skills and students' lack of preparation for the writing we want them to do at all levels of the university. But in this paper, instead of beginning by looking at students, I want to frame the challenge of improving student writing not by looking first at the students' lack of ability and the obstacles to their success but instead by looking more closely at us—the faculty and university leaders. I want to reflect on the ways in which we use writing in our professional lives because I believe that our skills and our experiences in learning to write give us some clues about where to begin to change our students' writing.

How do we use writing in our careers? With our friends and family? Using myself as an example, I immediately think of work that I have published. However, those formal, finished pieces of writing work could not have been created without a numerous drafts and revisions and pages and pages of notes as I tried to clarify my thoughts.

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Writing not only helps me disseminate my research but also writing helps me do the research. Again, informal writing helps me focus my work and writing allows me to create student surveys, reports and grant proposals. Writing helps me share that research not only through conference proceedings and publications but also as I create my website and consulting materials.

Moreover, writing is a teaching tool that I use to communicate not only with students as I create lectures and resource materials but also with my colleagues as we plan courses. Writing is fundamental to the ways in which I report to administration about my activities, and it is vital to ways in which I ask for funding.

As most of us do, I write informally as part of email or text conversations with students and with family members. At other times, writing can be very personal as it is when I write in my journal or creative as it used to be long ago when I wrote poems and essays.

In my life, writing is linked to reading, to thinking, and often to oral presentation. The audiences for my writing are multiple: students, colleagues, friends, family, and anonymous readers whom I'll never meet. Each of those audiences helps determine the genre of writing that I do and the audience dictates the level of formality and the register of language.

My guess is that most university professionals will recognize much of themselves in this snapshot of my writing life:

- Writing for multiple purposes in multiple genres and for different audiences;
- Shifting between registers of language, style, tone, and between languages and between disciplines;
- Integrating critical reading and writing;
- Writing to think, to plan, and to collaborate;
- Writing about specific content;
- Drafting and revising much of our writing.

In short, writing is inextricably integrated into our thinking, our learning, our research, our identities and our professional lives. Whether we write about business, about nursing, about engineering, or about mathematics and science,

writing is like oxygen in the university, a vital element that sustains us in its own invisible but ever present current.

Moreover, I think most of us are confident about what constitutes strong writing in our discipline. Our education and our experience in reading and writing has introduced us to that standard of excellence, and that is what we strive to practice. Also, we have an idea of how to produce writing that meets those standards. That, too, has been a part of our education even though we may have forgotten how we learned it.

Yet when we look at our students from the perspectives of our writing-rich lives, what do we see? Oddly enough, we see students who probably are doing a lot of reading and writing. Mobile devices, electronic social networks, the Internet, wireless technology, and email have created a generation of young adults who are always 'writing' or 'reading.' Of course, they are writing with their thumbs on a tiny keyboard and in abbreviated text and what may think of as 'reading'--- skimming across screens and clicking through web pages, social networks, 'tweets' and text messages--- bears very little resemblance to the kind of focused, coherent, lengthy critical reading that is important in the university. Even the longer form of email is not usually very long, coherent, or rhetorically complex as practiced by our students

Why do some of our students have such difficulty becoming stronger writers? First, our students are often unprepared for academic writing when they enter the university. In their secondary school education,— despite their possibly good grades —they may not have written very much. They are likely to have a very different and perhaps a narrowly defined practice of reading and writing, and they may have little idea of what process is required to achieve something more substantive. In short, they come to us with reduced expectations (or no expectations!) about how reading and writing functions in a university.

Second, they haven't written these genres before! If they have written in secondary school, it is rare that they have written the kinds of documents or given the kinds of presentations that we expect in the university. They are unfamiliar with not only academic vocabulary, style and tone but also the features of the genres, the

rhetorical strategies, the ways in which graphics are used, and the way evidence is organized and presented.

Third, they are ‘outsiders’ in their disciplinary field. They are new to the ways of thinking, acting, and communicating in their disciplines. They are strangers to the practices and implicit values embedded in all the activities of that discipline. Yet students are usually enthusiastic apprentices to the more experienced faculty (the ‘insiders’) who can offer mentoring that no writing teacher alone could provide. This mentoring dynamic is perhaps the strongest argument for communication-intensive courses in the discipline.

In short, students usually are beginning writers at a critical developmental stage. They also are ‘trying on’ new academic and professional identities as they write, and many of their poor attempts are the result of this stage in their development as novices or ‘outsiders’ in their field. It is true that some number of students lack basic writing skills and for those weaker writers, we must provide some remedial coursework early in their university career. But most student writers have basic skills, but they need guidance in how to use them.

I want to emphasize that all departments have an investment in guiding novice writers because all disciplines do require strong communication skills if our young graduates are going to succeed: in the healthcare professions, in engineering, in science, in business. Whether students advance to graduate school or to professional careers, writing and presenting well are fundamental to their success. Moreover, in this globalized world, many of our graduates will need to write and to present well in English, increasingly the common language of international journal publication and international professions. This is yet another challenge for students for whom English is not a first language.

Strong student writing outcomes are achieved in a university as the result of a shift in the university culture that is guided by leadership and faculty dialogue at several levels<sup>2</sup>. First, we develop a better definition of ‘good writing’ in our

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<sup>2</sup> Writing-across-the-Curriculum pedagogy is an approach that helps create this change in teaching and learning and in writing outcomes. Articles, books, and other resources can be found at <http://wac.colorado.edu>.

university and in our department. Second, we clearly define strong writing outcomes as an institutional objective and as a departmental objective. Third, we develop the curriculum and the pedagogy that can achieve those objectives. Fourth, we make a commitment in terms of support, resources, and faculty development to sustain that effort for the time it takes to achieve results.

Dialogue about what we mean by ‘good writing’ is a useful place to begin. For centuries, ‘good writing’ has seemingly been the territory of philosophy and literature. Of course, people were writing in many other ways, but aesthetic writing somehow became more highly valued as an object of beauty. The characteristics of that style— literary, imaginative, subjective—began to define what it means to write well. However, in the 1970s, scholars in the United Kingdom began to expand the definition of writing to acknowledge other functions. They categorized writing in three ways: poetic or creating an aesthetic object; expressive or reflecting on ideas; and transactional or conveying information for a purpose (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McCleod, & Rosen, 1975). Two of these ways of thinking about writing— expressive and transactional—are the foundation for thinking more clearly about writing at the university level. While poetic and aesthetic writing always has a home in higher education, many of us also want to write about business and engineering, about health studies and early childhood education, and about law and journalism, and thus we have a more expanded definition of ‘good writing.’

For example, let’s think about how professionals use writing in expressive ways. The students with whom I work and the professors with whom I collaborate use writing as a method of learning and as a support for critical thinking. Perhaps they write in lab notebooks or laptop computers as they make notes to help them remember concepts. Perhaps they use email or text to collaborate or consult with one another. Sometimes the writing may be more graphical or numerative as they sketch, draw, write code, or equations. I often see this kind of writing on whiteboards or blackboards when I walk into a classroom at MIT! But what is common to all this doodling, sketching, writing, note taking, texting, and documentation is that the writer is working with ideas. The writer using writing to learn. S/he is strengthening critical thinking, and beginning to articulate those

thoughts and s/he is using language to do so. In fact, as Britton claimed, “there is no learning without language” (Bazerman Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fourquette, & Garufis, 2005, p. 21)

Yet the rough drafts and the fragments of text in notebooks, on screens or whiteboards are not enough. Professionals in all disciplines must produce the final versions of papers, proposals, theses, articles, presentations, and reports. If they are to succeed in their profession, they must not only do the technical work, they must also create successful documents that communicate that work to others. In fact, we could say that the work is not complete until the solution to the problem or challenge is communicated effectively to others so that new knowledge can be created and problems can be solved.

The definition of ‘good writing’ that we want to convey to our students mirrors our own use of writing. Writing is a skill that must be developed and used to think and to learn, to discuss, and to collaborate, but there is also a finished version that conforms to the criteria of a specific discipline. Many of our students are unaware of these concepts.

Having a definition of what ‘good writing’ means for our students, we are better able to develop learning objectives that guide our teaching and course development.. For our students, we need to set a clear vision of the kind of writing and presentation forms that we expect them to achieve in their disciplines. Often, these students lack confidence in their communication abilities, and clarification of these objectives is one of the ways that we begin to redirect their energy toward success. Moreover, if our students are to reach those goals, we must agree on these definitions among ourselves: at the system level, at the department level, and among faculty in the department. At times, this agreement will be a high-level, consensus about institutional objectives, but at the ‘local’ level—the department level—, it will reflect agreement about what professionals in that discipline value in writing and communication (Poe, Lerner, & Craig, 2010). When we have this kind of focus, we then can begin to modify the culture of the institution and the department and to create learning opportunities that benefit student writing outcomes. These first steps seem simple but in reality, defining ‘good writing’ and developing clear

learning objectives requires sustained faculty dialog. However, without this investment of reflection and discussion, faculty efforts in the classroom are likely to be uneven and perhaps unproductive.

Each university will make decisions about curriculum and pedagogy that fit its own specific institutional context; however, there are well-researched practices that are correlated with strong student outcomes in writing (Bazerman, et. al, 2005). Some of these practices are implemented at the level of the university curriculum while others are implemented at the 'local' or departmental level.

At the curricular level, we plan to construct a coherent sequence of courses that lead students not only through knowledge acquisition but also develop their writing skills.

#### *Effective practices at the curricular level*

- Students benefit from moderate writing instruction and sustained practice in each year of study.
- Writing practice is most effective when it is situated in an authentic and deals with meaningful material. Writing courses should begin at the introductory level, but each should progress to writing in disciplinary courses so that s/he can absorb the vocabulary, style, rhetoric, and values of the specific discipline through repeated practice opportunities.

The expertise of the disciplinary professor or the writing teacher in the classroom is at the heart of stronger writing outcomes for students. Thus there are specific practices that are correlated with student success in writing.

#### *Effective practices at the classroom level:*

- Writing should be linked to critical reading and critical thinking, to learning, and in disciplinary courses, to the meaningful activities in the course.
- Faculty must respond to student writing, and students should be expected to revise at least one writing assignment based on comments.

- Writing assignments should be distributed throughout the term rather than concentrated at the end of the term.
- Writing assignments should be graded by faculty and not by teaching assistants.
- Communication-intensive courses should be small enough so that the professor can pay attention to student writing development.

There are other curricular and pedagogical decisions that support stronger student outcomes in writing. For example, a shift from lecture-based teaching to project-based learning allows students to engage in more 'hands on' learning and provides ample opportunities for writing assignments. Similarly, the regular use of active learning strategies in a classroom offers opportunities to use writing as a tool for learning.

It becomes clear that strong student writing outcomes are not the result of a single course or a single assignment or by having students sit through hours of lecture. We want students to write in each year of study and in disciplinary classrooms. We want to provide remedial resources for truly weak writers. Thus the fourth effort that we must make is to commit to providing the support and resources to sustain the plan for the time it takes to achieve results.

For example, professors who take on a communication-intensive course will benefit from course release time so that their teaching loads are not too heavy, thus allowing them to attend to student writing and also to maintain their research goals. Professors who teach communication-intensive courses also need time to revise course assignments as they refine their pedagogy. Moreover, communication-intensive courses, should be smaller so that a professor is not overwhelmed by too much work. Also, disciplinary professors will benefit from the support of writing teachers who may collaborate on assignment design and writing assessment.

University leaders can also support faculty by funding strong teaching and learning centers that provide professional development initiatives that focus on assignment design, assessment of writing, or oral presentation. Similarly, a writing



center that provides support to all students, regardless of their enrollment in a course, can lighten the load of the classroom professor and provide weaker writers with feedback. Also administrators can develop tutoring programs at either a department level or across the university, thus giving students ample opportunities for feedback and support as they write.

Last but hardly least, university leaders should recognize contributions of innovative teachers in communication-intensive courses as they consider promotion and tenure cases. All too often, creativity, ingenuity and skill in the classroom has been overlooked when research is the primary criteria for advancement.

Writing teachers are disciplinary faculty, too. University leaders can also establish policies that hire full-time professional writing teachers rather than part-time adjunct teachers who may have neither the skills nor the commitment to work closely with students and with disciplinary professors. And with writing teachers as with disciplinary professors in communication-intensive courses, it is essential for administrators to keep course loads and class sizes at reasonable levels in order to allow the necessary focus on student writing development.

In closing, it becomes clear that strengthening student writing is no simple task to be accomplished for once and for all by a single course in some distant corner of a university. Instead, strong student writers emerge when they have been encouraged to practice writing in meaningful ways and in authentic contexts in all the years of their education. Planning and implementing changes requires faculty dialogue. However, no matter whether we are a professor, a department leader, a university administrator or all three---each of us can contribute to the development of stronger student writers.

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