Making It Easier for Faculty to Raise the Quality of Writing Across the Business Curriculum

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Request for One Course Release
Summer Semester 2010

“I have reviewed the proposal and I support the request for a course release for the project”

Naveen Donthu
Interim Chair, Department of Marketing

3/16/10 Date
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Problem Statement

Business faculty members value well-written student reports. Well-written reports make arguments understandable so that faculty can more easily determine mastery of course materials. Although all RCB students take required courses in business communication, effective writing skills are best developed by practice across the curriculum. Anecdotally, students describe great variation in faculty emphasis and expectations among those who require writing assignments.

While surveys of employers routinely show that they want colleges and universities to place more emphasis on written and oral communication skills, few business faculty are formally trained to teach writing. Hershey (2007) notes that there is little “how to information that instructors can use to show and/or explain to students a way of writing better” (p. 44). He found literally thousands of for-profit businesses devoted to improving business writing skills but very few academic resources upon which business faculty members could rely.

To expect good writing skills, faculty must possess confidence in their own knowledge and ability to guide students. Faculty may have forgotten the names of common writing mistakes (e.g., misplaced modifiers) or rules of language use (e.g., effect vs. affect, that vs. which) that allow them to be comfortable teaching. In addition, they may feel they have no ability to eliminate the “pretentious vocabulary, convoluted phrasing, and vague meaning” inherent in much business writing and reflected in student papers.

Instead of relying on the independent efforts of select faculty or attempting to provide training to faculty members, we believed that a central, interactive, cross-disciplinary approach to more effective writing could be developed for faculty members to promote to their students. Discipline-specific efforts have been applied in programs such as the Master’s of Taxation.

Over the past three years, we’ve created an interactive web-based learning module – essentially a free online writing textbook – focused on business research report writing. Our site is broadly focused, covering parts of a research report, writing in Plain English, communicating numbers, and effective use of graphs and charts. It was designed to be cross-disciplinary. The site can be used for general guidelines, freeing faculty to focus on discipline-specific writing approaches. The site can be used in whole or in part and linked from Sharepoint or uLearn class sites.

1 www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/Re8097abcombined.pdf
3 Definition of jargon at Dictionary.com.
In developing the module, the goal was to:

• promote student use across the curriculum by creating a central and free resource
• create higher involvement in learning by providing interactive content for complex topics
• allow student self-assessment through quizzes and exercises, and
• importantly, reduce the burden of individual faculty members to develop their own instruction for students on writing effective reports.

Proposal Objectives

While the module is currently available to students and faculty, it does not yet provide faculty with assessment tools to implement it as a standard for writing. We’ve created the “online textbook” and now propose to create a portfolio of assessment tools to allow faculty members to use and adapt this central resource to raise the quality of writing among J. Mack Robinson students.

Specifically, we will develop four types of assessment tools – self-tests, exercises, rubrics and student feedback surveys – tied to the Writing Effective Research and Technical Reports module. The tools will be designed to minimize instructors’ efforts to “teach writing,” instead letting them refer students to the module components for improvement. These tools can be adopted in whole or in part, and used as graded or ungraded elements of a course, in general form or adapted to a specific course, to determine that students have studied the content and can apply it to their writing.

In summary, we propose to improve student writing by providing faculty members with tools to hold students to broadly-accepted standards for effective writing of business reports and apply them within their individual courses without developing their own teaching materials.

Method

Using the revised Bloom’s taxonomy, learning objectives will be established for specific content of the four major topics covered in the module:

- What is a research report
- Writing in Plain English
- Communicating numbers
- Effective use of graphics

Online self-tests will be developed for different sections and linked from the site. These tests will focus on objectives like recalling, identifying, differentiating, and checking, and include multi-item quizzes on the topics. Each quiz will provide immediate feedback to students on their performance. At the end, the student will receive a final score. If desired, a faculty member can have students print their results or email them to a designated address. Example topics are 1) what constitutes plagiarism and 2) how to acknowledge sources correctly.

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Exercises will address learning objectives such as identifying, comparing, checking, and critiquing. These exercises would include specific guidelines for student- or peer-review of reports. For example, a handout on a simple method of editing for conciseness can be used as a class exercise, allowing a student or peer to edit a draft of their paper with or without input from the faculty member. An additional exercise would direct students to develop clear Plain English definitions of common terms found in business reports (e.g., important, statistically significant).

Rubrics would be developed or adapted to provide instructors with a checklist of types of writing problems that may be present (i.e., wordiness, inaccurate use of terms, etc.) with links directly to the site where remedies are addressed.

Finally, student feedback surveys would be developed to allow faculty to determine if students believe their own skills have improved through the methods used by the faculty member. These short surveys would allow students to respond to questions about the useful of the module as well as the course instruction in improving their writing skills.

Faculty members will have flexibility in using the module and the tools. Anyone wishing to use the module and tools in his or her classes will be provided a comprehensive list of available tools and guidelines on alternative means by which they can be used (e.g., graded or ungraded uses).

Evaluation

For evaluation purposes, there are two relevant audiences – students and faculty. For students, an online feedback survey will be available to all instructors adopting the module in whole or in part to use for assessment purposes. The survey will measure the ease of use and usefulness of the module and various assessment tools (i.e., self-tests), as well as students’ beliefs about any improvement in their own writing. We have commitments in multiple courses to use the module and the developed assessment tools and will capture the data from these uses.

Instructors who adopt the module and tools, in whole or in part, will be surveyed for feedback on the ease of use and effectiveness of the tools as well as the improvement, if any, in students’ report writing.

Budget

In support of the effort, one course release is requested for Summer 2010.

The authors agree to deliver a presentation at a future FDC workshop on the results. In addition, an article is planned to explain and promote the concept of public-domain specialized textbooks, such as this module.