

Establishing Peer Mentor-Led Writing Groups in Large First-Year Courses

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This paper describes the results of a pilot project designed to improve students' academic writing in a large (200-student) first-year Agriculture class at the University of Saskatchewan. In collaboration with the course's professor, the Writing Centre coordinator and a summer student designed curriculum for four two-hour Writing Group sessions carved out of weekly scheduled lab times, and trained peer mentors to lead students through the writing process. Writing Groups fostered a sense of community in the otherwise-isolated process of writing a challenging term paper, and provided opportunities for rich and frequent feedback. Ultimately, Writing Groups were shown to demystify the process of academic writing, making it more manageable and accessible to students.

Introduction

Emphasizing to new students the value of university-level academic writing in a discipline is crucial, but at the same time it can be daunting for a professor of a large class¹ to carry out writing instruction and marking, even with teaching assistants (Harfitt, 2011; Taylor, 2008; Ward & Jenkins, 1992). Previous studies have documented clear differences between the types of writing asked of students in high school and what they must produce in university writing assignments (Beil & Knight,

2007). In many institutions, the work of teaching writing is relegated to a first-year composition class; however, studies have shown that first-year students continue to demonstrate significant deficiencies in university-level academic writing, undermining two determinants of increased student retention: “academic-related skills [and] academic self-confidence” (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004, p. 7). With one-class ‘fix-it’ solutions and growing class sizes, opportunities for professors to help students learn to write in a discipline may be few (Graves & Graves, 2006; O’Brien-Moran & Soiferman, 2010).

¹ Large classes have been generally defined as classes with enrollments above one hundred students (Boyd, 2010).

In addition to the need to address first-year students' skills in and competence with academic writing, the inherent needs of writers must be addressed. As expressed by Pinter (1995), "All writers, especially first year writers, need support from peers and that's another reason why learning to write is not an individual task. Instructors must also support students in several ways, including individual conferencing and sensitive marginalia" (p. 4). While it is common practice for instructors to provide constructive feedback on writing assignments, in large classes the feedback may not be as rich and meaningful, and thus is often left unread (Orsmond & Merry, 2011).

In response to these challenges, the University of Saskatchewan College of Agriculture & Bioresources, in collaboration with the Writing Centre, piloted Writing Groups in a 200-student first-year class. The primary goal was to create a peer mentor-led collaborative learning environment focused on teaching the process of academic research and writing; exposing students to regular, structured, and clear feedback using detailed rubrics; and encouraging a continuous dialogue about, and practice with, writing. A thorough assessment of the pilot revealed increased levels of confidence and decreased levels of struggle with academic writing amongst students, resulting in positive results on their term paper grades.

Project Design

The Writing Groups program is driven by student peer mentoring, which can be defined as "an encouraging and supportive one-to-one relationship with a more experienced [student]...characterized by positive role modeling, promotion of raised aspirations, positive reinforcement...and joint problem-solving" (Topping, 2005, p. 632). At the University of Saskatchewan, peer mentors are selected for their strong academic performance and willingness to help other students. For the Writing Groups program, peer mentors attend a two-day training session led by the Writing Centre coordinator and the course professor, and they participate in regular meetings throughout the term.

Writing Groups were conducted in the weekly scheduled laboratory sessions of a 200-student first-year course, of which four two-hour labs were devoted to Writing Groups. For each lab, one peer mentor led approximately 20 students for two hours of writing activities. Eight percent of the student's overall grade was allocated to attendance and participation in Writing Groups, which communicated to students that writing skills were valuable to the professor, and that the work completed was intrinsic to the course.

At the heart of the Writing Groups curriculum was a process approach to writing, which placed emphasis on smaller, more manageable writing tasks in building towards the final product. The curriculum condensed the larger writing task into three stages: prewriting activities, drafting, and editing and proofreading. Each Writing Group session was then planned to achieve a stage-specific product (e.g., producing an outline in the pre-writing session) while leaving students with take-away skills and strategies they could draw on for future writing assignments. Each session built on the previous one, and students incrementally completed their term papers with the guidance and support of peer mentors. Peer mentors planned their sessions to suit their facilitation style, writing experience, and sense of their group's dynamic, while simultaneously meeting curriculum objectives.

Furthermore, the sessions included rubric-guided feedback along the way. First, students completed a low-stakes writing activity, which was intended as an early warning system for those unaware of the gap between their previous writing experiences and the one immediately facing them. Next, students peer-reviewed each other's drafts. Later, students were given a comprehensive self-assessment rubric for revising their final paper. Finally, the professors marked final papers with a detailed rubric.

Research Methodology

To assess the success of Writing Groups, a pre- and post-term survey methodology – adopted from the 'Writer's Personal Profile' (Robinson & Burton, 2009) – was used with questionnaires administered

to students at the beginning and end of the course (Appendix A). Students were asked questions about their perceived level of comfort with university-level writing, areas of struggle in the writing process, and their opinions on the effectiveness of Writing Groups. This data was then compared with term paper, attendance, and participation marks, allowing for a measurement of difference between both objective and subjective indicators of students' writing proficiency before and after the pilot. The results are presented below.

Results

Overall, it was found that 49.6% of students felt their writing skills had improved as a result of participating in Writing Groups, while 21.6% of students did not feel their writing skills had improved and 28.8% were unsure.

Students who felt their writing skills had improved specified major improvements in structuring their essays and sentences, citing, organizing their ideas, and understanding the process of writing a scientific paper. This finding was corroborated by a pre- and post-term comparison. In the post-term, students reported decreased levels of struggle in the following categories: understanding what the instructor wants (-26%); organizing information and presenting it in a logical sequence (-18%); creating smooth transitions (-17%); incorporating and citing tables and figures (-24%); and incorporating

and citing borrowed information (-19%). Overall, a strong correlation was found between student's decreased level of struggle and increased levels of comfort with academic writing ($p < 0.001$).

For students who felt their writing skills did not improve, the commonly cited reasons were that they were already aware of the writing process and did not feel that they were being exposed to new material, or that Writing Groups did not address their specific needs as writers. Finally, for students who were not sure whether their writing skills had improved, many had wanted to see a term paper mark and/or feedback before deciding whether Writing Groups were effective.

As illustrated in Table 1, students who felt their writing skills improved as a result of their participation in the program tended, on average, to attain a 6.6% higher mark on their term papers versus students who did not find that the program improved their writing skills.

Furthermore, Table 2 shows that students who had achieved the maximal attendance and participation marks were significantly more likely to also attain a higher term paper mark.

In addition to positive changes in the key indicators of term paper marks and self-perceived levels of struggle in writing, the course's professor was emphatic in her assessment of Writing Groups' success: "I am convinced that the writing was better as a consequence of the writing groups. Certainly the literature citations seemed to be better... I had fewer students coming to talk to me in desperation.

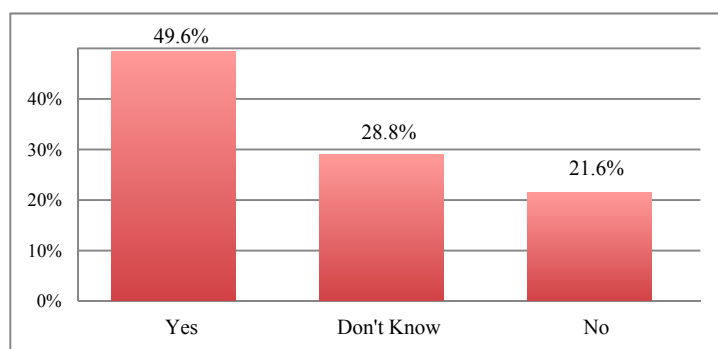


FIGURE 1

"I feel my writing skills have improved as a result of participating in Writing Groups"

They understood what they needed to do” (F. Walley, personal communication, August 11, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusions

Kuh (2008) writes that requiring students to do more writing and providing them with feedback has strong positive effects on student learning and engagement. However, the writing skills deficiency common to incoming students, coupled with the logistical problems of including writing assignments in large courses, makes this high-impact educational practice difficult to implement. Writing Groups successfully addressed these challenges by using peer mentorship to create a community of support and guidance for first-year writers, and by emphasizing academic writing as process rather than product. By starting the research and term paper early, and dissecting the writing into more manageable tasks – in a mentored and feedback-rich environment – student confidence and learning increased.

As a result of our assessment and the professor’s recommendations, improvements were made: “The first year went well, and we learned more about what

seemed to work and what needed some tweaking... [namely] I struggled in lectures to cover material that normally would be covered in labs. Weighing pros and cons, I decided we needed to take back one... lab” (F. Walley, personal communication, August 11, 2011). By subtracting one of the four labs given to writing groups, the professor realized incorporating writing instruction within lectures would legitimize it as intrinsic to the course rather than simply a side topic: “Reinforcing the writing skills in lecture seemed to work really well and I would definitely work it into the lectures more often in the future” (F. Walley, personal communication, August 11, 2011). Since last year’s success, Writing Groups has expanded to two courses in the 2011-2012 academic year. Thus, while including written assignments in large first-year classes remains a challenge, peer mentor-led Writing Groups can offer a viable and effective solution for addressing this challenge and meeting the needs of both students and professors.

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TABLE 1

Student term paper marks by self-reported effectiveness of Writing Groups

	Yes (N=64)	No (N=26)	Don’t Know (N =36)	Total (N=126)
Mean	78.13%	71.50%	76.14%	76.19%
Standard Deviation	13.8	19.4	18.6	16.6

TABLE 2

Term paper marks by level of attendance and participation

	Less than Maximal (N=47)	Maximal Attendance/Participation (N=137)
Term Paper Mark	57.1%	75.2%

**Significant at the 0.01 Level

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Biographies

Liv Marken is the Writing Help Coordinator for the University of Saskatchewan. She is also a sessional lecturer in the Department of English. Her research interests include teaching via live writing, and delivery of writing help services to Aboriginal students and international students. She is currently investigating writing-to-learn activities for peer-led, course-based learning communities.

Stan Yu is the Research and Program Evaluations Specialist for the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Saskatchewan. He is also a current master's candidate in the Department of Sociology.

Sarah Marcoux graduated with a B.A. (Honors) in Regional & Urban Planning from the University of Saskatchewan in the spring of 2012. As a summer student at the University Learning Centre in 2010, she worked exclusively on the Writing Groups project, on aspects ranging from curriculum to assessment. She plans to begin a Master of Education program in the fall of 2012 with a research focus of sustainability policy in K-12 and post-secondary education in Canada.

Appendix A

Writing Groups Pre- and Post-Term Questionnaires

Writing Groups Pre-term Questionnaire (#1 of 2)

The purpose of this questionnaire is (1) to compare your responses to a second, end-of-term questionnaire to determine the efficacy of Writing Group labs, and (2) to help your Writing Group leader better tailor each lab to your needs. Your honesty is appreciated.

PUT ONLY YOUR NSID ON THE FORM. We do not wish to obtain your identity; your NSID and responses are for information-gathering purposes and for evaluation of the program only.

NSID: _____

1. Do you expect your writings skills to improve as a result of participating in writing group labs?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I don't know

2. Which of the following aspects of the writing process do you continue to struggle with?

Please circle letters for all that apply.

- a) Coming up with an appropriate and workable topic
- b) Understanding what the instructor wants
- c) Locating and evaluating sources
- d) Organizing the information and presenting it in a logical sequence
- e) Generating the first draft of a paper
- f) Writing the introduction and/or conclusion
- g) Sticking to the topic; identifying and omitting extraneous information
- h) Creating smooth transitions between paragraphs and sentences
- i) Incorporating and citing tables and figures in the text
- j) Incorporating and citing borrowed information into the text
- k) Revising paragraphs and other elements of the paper's organization
- l) Finding and correcting grammatical and spelling errors
- m) Using an appropriate tone, writing style, and level of complexity for the target audience
- n) Following the assignment specifications for format, length, style, audience, etc.
- o) Establishing and maintaining a research and writing schedule that allows enough time to produce the best paper
- p) Other (please specify)

3. Name two of your strengths as a writer:

- i.
- ii.

4. Name two of your weaknesses as a writer:

- i.
- ii.

5. List two characteristics of “good writing” in your chosen discipline/career field (name your field or major, please):
 - i.
 - ii.
6. Briefly describe your typical approach to **revising** drafts of your writing.

The End. Thank you for your time!

Appendix B

Writing Groups Post-term Questionnaire (#2 of 2)

The purpose of this questionnaire is (1) compare your responses to the first, beginning-of-term questionnaire to determine the efficacy of Writing Group labs, and (2) to improve Writing Group labs for the future. Your honesty is appreciated.

PUT ONLY YOUR NSID ON THE FORM. We do not wish to obtain your identity; your NSID and responses are for information-gathering purposes and for evaluation of the program only.

NSID: _____

1. Which of the following aspects of the writing process do you continue to struggle with?

Please circle letters for all that apply.

- a) Coming up with an appropriate and workable topic
- b) Understanding what the instructor wants
- c) Locating and evaluating sources
- d) Organizing the information and presenting it in a logical sequence
- e) Generating the first draft of a paper
- f) Writing the introduction and/or conclusion
- g) Sticking to the topic; identifying and omitting extraneous information
- h) Creating smooth transitions between paragraphs and sentences
- i) Incorporating and citing tables and figures in the text
- j) Incorporating and citing borrowed information into the text
- k) Revising paragraphs and other elements of the paper's organization
- l) Finding and correcting grammatical and spelling errors
- m) Using an appropriate tone, writing style, and level of complexity for the target audience
- n) Following the assignment specifications for format, length, style, audience, etc.
- o) Establishing and maintaining a research and writing schedule that allows enough time to produce the best paper
- p) Other (please specify)

2. My writing skills improved as a result of Writing Group labs.

- a) Strongly Agree
- b) Agree
- c) Neutral
- d) Disagree
- e) Strongly Disagree

3. Why do you feel that Writing Group labs did or did not improve your writing skills?

4. Has your approach to revision changed since the beginning of the semester?

- a) Yes
- b) No

5. Briefly describe your approach to revising drafts of your writing

6. How many times did you visit the ULC Writing Help drop-in centre for this class?
 - a) 0 times
 - b) 1 – 2 times
 - c) 3 times or more

7. Did you use the ULC online Writing Help for this class?
 - a) 0 times
 - b) 1 – 2 times
 - c) 3 times or more

8. Did you attend a ULC Writing Help workshop?
 - a) 0 times
 - b) 1 – 2 times
 - c) 3 times or more

9. Besides the Writing Groups labs, did you receive any other form(s) of help with your writing for this class?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

10. If you answered ‘yes’ to the previous question, please specify what kinds of help you received (**Circle all that apply**):
 - a) Private tutoring
 - b) Family and/or friends not in this class
 - c) Other student(s) in this class, outside of Writing Group lab times
 - d) Librarian(s)
 - e) The Professors for this class
 - f) Lab demonstrators
 - g) Course reference booklet
 - h) Other online resources

The End. Thank you for your time!