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Teaching business writing at the community college: Improving writing skills

By

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ABSTRACT

Community college graduates represent a diverse population of educational backgrounds and often first-generation college students who seek employment opportunities after completing an Associate's degree. This brief explores the impact a Business Writing Across the Core (BWAC) program has on the writing skill of business students at the community college level and explores their perceptions of their preparation to write in the workplace. The study showed that the BWAC program had a positive effect on the participants' writing skills to prepare business documents, and the students welcomed the opportunity to write business documents.

AIM

The ability to effectively communicate through writing is essential to succeed in higher education and beyond (Varelas, A., Wolfe, K. S., & Ialongo, E., 2015). The aim of this mixed-methods case study was to explore the efficacy of the BWAC program's effectiveness in preparing community college students majoring in business to produce high-quality standards-based business writing documents.

PROBLEM

Community college students majoring in business are described as deficient in business writing skills, despite successfully completing the required English and business writing courses. Challenging for community college professors are the students who enter college underprepared in the basic skills needed to succeed, and who are at dramatically different levels with regard to these abilities (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003).

Prior research conducted by Lentz (2013) identified four reasons for deficits in writing. The skill of writing takes time, and the shortage of time to write is a factor many students stated as a reason why they do not perform to expectations. Second, students believe they have acquired the skills to write well. This fault, in their mindset, prevents them from seeking out tools to improve their writing skills. Third, students do not believe that correct grammar is important, nor does incorrect grammar threaten their credibility in the workplace. Finally, students stated they have no time to proofread messages; therefore, communication with errors continue to be sent. As a result, students' written communication continues to be plagued with deficiencies, which negatively affects student learning outcomes.

Research Questions

Central Question: To what extent does the Business Writing Across the Core (BWAC) program address the writing skill of community college students majoring in business in producing high-quality standards-based business documents and their perceptions about their ability to write?

Sub-question 1: From an instructor's perspective, how does a Business Writing Across the Core program improve business students' proficiency when comparing writing performance before and after the program?

Sub-question 2: How does participation in a Business Writing Across the Core program affect their perception of writing and motivate students to seek out tools to improve their writing skills before they enter the workforce?

The BWAC program is a document-driven program with specific goals and rationale (Hutchins, 2015): (a) to provide instruction in specific business documents, (b) to instruct students in the method of business rhetoric, or critical thinking, for problem-solving, (c) to inform students of the types of business writing genres which address different business problems, styles, and audience awareness, and (d) to provide a repetitive experience for writing.

Methodology

Students in designated courses produced a specific business document twice within a course, before and after receiving specific BWAC writing instruction. The study group was comprised of 23 students – 9 males and 14 females and represented 20 students from the sophomore class and 3 students from the freshmen class. The BWAC rubric revealed that of the four rubric components - clarity, logic and organization of ideas, mechanics, and style - the participants had the largest improvement in the mechanics of writing. Mechanics or writing literacy examined vocabulary, spelling, sentence construction, grammar, punctuation, and paragraph construction.

Semi-structured interviews gathered the qualitative data in this instrumental case study design. Open-ended questions were presented to ascertain the students' perceptions about their ability to write for the workplace. Based upon the emerged themes of business writing, academic rigor, and program experience, obvious patterns and trends can be the focus to improve the writing skills of community college students.

Discussion

Drawn from the data, community college students majoring in business, desire more opportunities to practice writing essential business documents within the program. The mechanics of writing increased dramatically, 43% from unacceptable to acceptable and 26% from acceptable to excellent (see Tables 1 & 2). The overall theme from the results of the quantitative study was that students desire more practice in business writing and meaningful feedback from their writing submissions. The qualitative research study results showed that participants became more cognizant of the importance of writing in a business context. It also clarified specific business documents used in the workplace had more meaning and students recognized how important feedback was in the writing process.

Table 1

Percentage of participants' scores that increased from unacceptable to acceptable categories

Trait	Increased from Unacceptable to Acceptable
Clarity	26%
Logic & organization of ideas	30%
Mechanics	43%
Style	22%

Table 2

Percentage of participants' scores that increased from acceptable to excellent categories

Trait	Increased from Acceptable to Excellent
Clarity	9%
Logic & organization of ideas	22%
Mechanics	26%
Style	13%

Research Implications

This study sets the groundwork for future research that features writing across the curriculum or writing in the discipline programming such as BWAC. The BWAC program could provide authentic business writing experiences and prepare students to write in the workplace. In addition, the BWAC program may facilitate the institutional support that is lacking within the community college environment (Gardner, 2010). Many students commented on how they desired more concentrated business writing opportunities within the business program. Also, they stated how much more confident they felt in their writing skill after the intensive instruction on Business writing and wanted to have these experiences extended into other business courses to improve their business writing skills.

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Author Biography



Karen S. Britt is a recent graduate of the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Management with a concentration in Human Resource Development in September 2019. Karen began her career as a Human Resource Generalist with a specialization in classification analysis and talent acquisition and management. After completing a Master's degree in Business Administration at Penn State University, she positioned herself within higher education. Karen has spent 28 years in higher education as an academic administrator and faculty member within private colleges and the community college environment. As a professor of business and economics at the community college level, Karen is focusing her efforts on improving the business writing skills of students and preparing them to write in the workplace. Since completing the doctoral program at Drexel University, Karen desires to present her research focus and findings to business communication affinity groups and journals.