

Students' perceptions of Writing-Enhanced

Classes at Truman State University

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“Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.”

—The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003, p. iii)

The ability to write well is one of the most important skills for students to have as they enter the workforce. More than 90 percent of midcareer professionals recently cited the “need to write effectively” as a skill “of great importance” in their day-to-day work (Light, 2001, p. 11). Unfortunately, despite this amazing need to write, the national writing level is very poor. In 1998, only 22% of students were at the proficient level or above by the time they reached 12th grade. Even worse, only one in one hundred wrote an advanced writing level (see Table 1).

Table 1: National Writing Achievement by Grade Level, 1998. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (1998); cited in The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003).

Grade	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	Advanced
Four	16%	84%	23%	1%
Eight	16%	84%	27%	1%
Twelve	22%	78%	22%	1%

A study done by the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges concluded that “the amount of time most students spend writing should be at least doubled ... This change alone will do more to improve student performance than anything else states or local school leaders can do” (2003, p. 28).

Truman has a responsibility to its students to address these issues and help students write at a level that is at least acceptable in the work force. To this end, Truman requires that all students complete at least three classes designated as “Writing-Enhanced” (WE) before graduating. Truman has set forth eleven outcomes for WE classes to fulfill. According to these standards, a student in a WE class should:

- use writing as a mode of learning as well as a method of communicating what was learned.
- engage in deep revision, closely examining and further developing the reasoning in the writing.
- be able to write clear, coherent, and well organized prose for a targeted audience.
- be able to generate, organize, and communicate information and ideas fully, clearly, and cogently.

- assess my own writing to uncover strengths and concerns, and be able to generate strategies for improvement.
- demonstrate a command of syntax, style, and tone appropriate to a task.
- exhibit critical thinking such as the ability to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and reflect.
- solicit external critiques of my writing to guide revision.
- exhibit mastery of punctuation, usage, and formatting conventions.
- show audience awareness.
- as a regular habit of the writing process, copy-edit his/her own work for mechanics, style, and coherence.

Though the concept behind the WE course program is superficially strong, to our knowledge no evidence exists demonstrating its effectiveness at achieving its desired outcomes, nor that WE classes differ in any significant way from non-WE classes. The present study therefore examined students' experiences in WE courses at Truman State University to see if these classes were effective at meeting their desired goals. To this end, we surveyed students enrolled in a WE-designated class at Truman in the Spring or Fall 2009 semesters. We attempted to address the following questions regarding WE classes: (1) the amount and kinds of writing students do in WE classes; (2) the amount and kinds of revision to preliminary drafts of writing assignments students did in WE classes, and how helpful students felt each method of revision is; (3) how well students felt WE classes fulfilled the desired outcomes of the WE class program; and (4) how students' perceptions of what WE classes should be compares to their perception of what WE classes are.

Method

We sent a link to an online survey to 2,982 Truman students enrolled in a WE class in the Spring or Fall 2009 semesters. A total of 223 students completed the survey (74 male, 149 female); 10.3% of students were in their first year, 22.9% in their second year, 26.9% in their third year, 35% in their fourth year, and 4.9% in their fifth year or higher. Students had a wide

variety of majors, the most common being English (13.5%), Biology (13.5%), Psychology (9.4%), and History (8.5%).

Results

Amount of Writing in WE Classes

We examined the amount of writing students did in WE classes in two ways: the number of writing assignments they completed and the number of pages of writing they submitted.

Number of assignments We found that students averaged 8.84 assignments per class with a standard deviation of 10.150, a minimum of 1 assignment, a median of 6 assignments, and a maximum of 85 assignments. A 95% confidence interval indicated that the true mean number of writing assignments students completed in WE classes was between 7.46 and 10.22.

Number of pages We found that students averaged 22.73 pages of writing per class with a standard deviation of 20.414, a minimum of 1, a median of 20, and a maximum of 130. A 95% confidence interval on the data showed that the actual mean number of pages written by students in WE classes was between 19.95 and 25.51.

Kinds of Writing in WE Classes

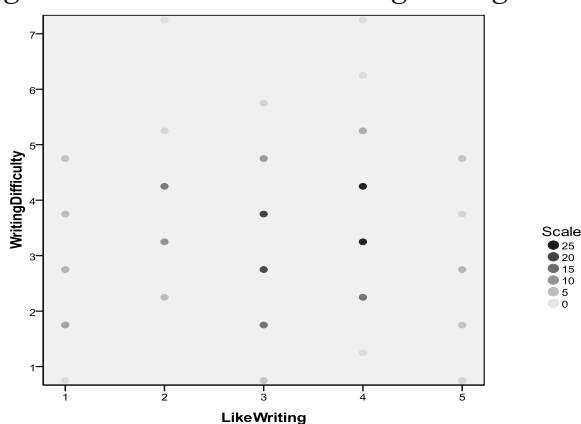
Research papers and essays were the most common forms of writing that students did. Specifically, 69% of students reported that they wrote a research paper in their WE course; 52% of students reported that they wrote an essay; 25% of students reported writing journal entries; and 15% of students reported writing abstracts.

Comparison of WE and Non-WE Classes

On a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 meant non-WE classes were significantly harder and 7 meant WE classes were significantly harder, students reported a mean score of 3.32 and a standard deviation of 1.159, showing that they felt WE classes were harder than non-WE classes

($p < .001$). We were concerned that students might report this due to the fact that they do not like writing. Surprisingly, there was no correlation between how much a student likes writing and the perceived difficulty of the class (see Figure 1). Furthermore, students significantly ($p < .001$) reported that their writing level improved after taking a Writing Enhanced course. Not only does this show that students find writing to be challenging, but it also demonstrates the importance of having courses that help students become better writers.

Figure 1: Relation between liking writing and difficulty of WE classes



Comparison of WE Classes in Different Departments

Students who responded to this survey took English, History, and Junior Interdisciplinary Seminar (JINS) courses more than courses in other departments. This is not surprising, as English and history majors responded in greater frequency to the survey, probably due to the fact that it was a survey involving writing and these majors heavily emphasize that skill. Classes with different prefixes did not differ in the number of assignments that were assigned ($p > 0.05$) or in the number of pages they wrote in the class ($p > 0.20$), but did differ significantly in the amount of revision completed ($p < .001$). It was also found that classes from different departments did not differ significantly in the level of writers that they produced (i.e., the student's post-writing level, $p > 0.20$).

Students' Amount, Types, and Helpfulness of Revision to Writing Assignments

Number of revisions We found that students completed some form of revision to a preliminary draft of an assignment for an average of 2.35 assignments. The standard deviation was 2.402, the minimum was 0, the median was 2, and the maximum was 12. A 95% confidence interval of the mean number of assignments requiring revision fell between 2.03 and 2.68.

Types of revision 65% of students reported having used professor feedback; 55% of students reported using peer review; 13% of students reported using the Writing Center; and 10% of students reported using another method such as a self-review or having friends or family review their work. On a scale of 1 being not helpful, 3 being moderately helpful, and 5 being extremely helpful, professor feedback received an average rating of 3.29, peer review a 3.00, and the Writing Center a 3.18. Students found all three forms of revision to be at least somewhat helpful ($p < .001$ vs. 1: Not helpful at all.) A Kruskal-Wallis Test found a significant difference in helpfulness among the three main types of revision ($p < .001$). Mann-Whitney follow-up tests revealed that professor feedback was significantly more helpful than both peer review and the Writing Center ($p < .001$ for each), but that there was no significant difference between peer review and the Writing Center ($p > 0.20$).

Perceptions of how well WE Classes Fulfill the WE Class Program Outcomes

Regarding the aforementioned standards that Truman sets for its WE courses, students reported that WE courses in general have sufficiently fulfilled each of the outcomes (all $p < .001$ vs. 4: Neither agree nor disagree; see table 2).

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation agreement to outcome statements

Outcome	Mean	Standard Deviation
use writing as a mode of learning as well as a method of communicating what was learned	5.38	1.176
engage in deep revision, closely examining and further developing the reasoning in the writing	5.00	1.584
be able to write clear, coherent, and well organized prose for a targeted audience	5.56	1.202
be able to generate, organize, and communicate information and ideas fully, clearly, and cogently	5.54	1.141
assess my own writing to uncover strengths and concerns, and be able to generate strategies for improvement	5.11	1.453
demonstrate a command of syntax, style, and tone appropriate to a task	5.20	1.289
exhibit critical thinking such as the ability to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and reflect	5.67	1.247
solicit external critiques of my writing to guide revision	4.93	1.438
exhibit mastery of punctuation, usage, and formatting conventions	5.03	1.352
show audience awareness	5.17	1.340
as a regular habit of the writing process, copy-edit his/her own work for mechanics, style, and coherence	5.21	1.318

Other Findings

We found that 44.4% of students said that they would submit work from their WE class to their portfolio; 17.5% said they would not; and 34.1% were not sure. Furthermore, 7% of students felt the grading in their WE class was unfair, citing reasons such as: *“Tests were too complex and long,” “The prompts were too vague,”* and *“The revisions and the suggestions made by the writing center were not the same changes my teacher would've made and it hurt my grade.”* However, there was no overarching reason to suspect that WE courses, in general, were graded unfairly.

Students' Perceptions of what WE Classes should be

Students generally thought that WE classes should “focus more on the writing process” than non-WE classes, including drafts and revision of papers. Many students felt that these classes should include more writing than non-WE classes, including some that felt that writing “should be done daily or weekly.” Only a few students mentioned that writing should be a tool

for teaching the class material, as opposed to a focus on the writing itself as the concept being learned.

Students' Perceptions of what WE Classes are as compared to non-WE classes

Students' opinions of the actual difference between WE and non-WE classes were mixed. Though many students felt the difference was what it should be, a significant number reported that the difference was minimal or nonexistent. Representative quotes include: *"From my experience, I feel that the difference might just be more writing in the writing-enhanced classes. There is not necessarily a large focus on the writing technique,"* and *"I couldn't tell much of a difference in most of the classes."* Many students also felt they did more writing in their non-WE classes.

Discussion

In general, our results indicated that Writing-Enhanced courses provide a valuable experience for students at Truman State University. We found that WE courses typically involve over 20 pages of writing, most commonly research papers or essays. On average, students reported significant improvement in their writing skills. Additionally, students typically underwent an extensive process of revision to their writing in WE classes, with an average of over 2 assignments per class requiring some form of editing. All types of revision were at least somewhat helpful though professor feedback was more helpful than both peer review and the Writing Center. Most importantly, students felt that WE classes fulfilled the stated outcomes of the WE class program. Finally, students felt that WE classes were generally graded fairly.

However, our study also showed significant room for improvement in the WE program. Though students did feel that WE classes achieved their desired outcomes, many students were unable to identify a noticeable difference between WE and non-WE classes, even though most students felt the two types of classes should differ significantly. This indicates that some WE

classes are not fulfilling the goals of the WE program, and that the goals of the WE program may be met in classes without a specific “Writing-Enhanced” designation. This study therefore draws the usefulness of such a label into question, at least as the Writing-Enhanced program is currently enacted.

Nevertheless, we feel that Truman should continue offering “Writing-Enhanced” courses, as the WE program ensures that all students gain experience in using writing as a mode of communication. However, Truman should strive to ensure that all classes with that designation are substantively different from classes without that designation. Truman should also extend the “Writing-Enhanced” label to all classes that fulfill the criteria for the designation, even those classes that are not currently “Writing-Enhanced.” Finally, Truman should emphasize the importance of having WE classes to students and faculty, both to increase understanding of the program and to further ensure that classes with the designation are meeting the goals of the program. Further research is necessary to identify which WE courses are meeting the goals of the WE program and which non-WE classes should receive the “Writing-Enhanced” designation. Properly identifying which classes should be “Writing-Enhanced” will significantly improve the quality of the Writing-Enhanced class program.

References

- Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges. (2003). *The Neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Appendix

Writing Difficulty (test if difficulty level < 4; if WE significantly harder than non-WE):

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
FourCol - WritingDifficulty	Negative Ranks	31 ^a	59.11	1832.50
	Positive Ranks	119 ^b	79.77	9492.50
	Ties	68 ^c		
	Total	218		

a. FourCol < WritingDifficulty

b. FourCol > WritingDifficulty

c. FourCol = WritingDifficulty

Test Statistics^b

	FourCol - WritingDifficulty
Z	-7.425 ^a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Based on negative ranks.

b. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Perceived Difficulty of WE Course vs. How Much a Student Liked Writing (test if correlation does not equal 0)

Correlations

Correlations

		LikeWriting	WritingDifficulty
LikeWriting	Pearson Correlation	1	.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.949
	N	218	213
WritingDifficulty	Pearson Correlation	.004	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.949	
	N	213	218

Nonparametric Correlations

Correlations

	LikeWriting	WritingDifficulty
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Kendall's tau_b	LikeWriting	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.988
		N	218	213
	WritingDifficulty	Correlation Coefficient	.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.988	.
		N	213	218
Spearman's rho	LikeWriting	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.991
		N	218	213
	WritingDifficulty	Correlation Coefficient	.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.991	.
		N	213	218

Writing Level Before WE Course vs. After WE Course (test if after > before)

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
PostWritingLevel - PreWritingLevel	Negative Ranks	5 ^a	48.20	241.00
	Positive Ranks	80 ^b	42.68	3414.00
	Ties	129 ^c		
	Total	214		

a. PostWritingLevel < PreWritingLevel

b. PostWritingLevel > PreWritingLevel

c. PostWritingLevel = PreWritingLevel

Test Statistics^b

	PostWritingLevel - PreWritingLevel
Z	-7.690 ^a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Based on negative ranks.

b. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Department of WE Class vs. Number of Writing Assignments

ANOVA

NumberOfAssignments

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4751.130	33	143.974	1.438	.073
Within Groups	16420.789	164	100.127		
Total	21171.919	197			

Department of WE Class vs. Number of Pages Written**ANOVA**

NumberOfPages

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8351.825	33	253.086	.628	.942
Within Groups	65271.298	162	402.909		
Total	73623.122	195			

Department of WE Class vs. Number of Revisions Done**ANOVA**

NumberOfRevisions

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	665.228	33	20.158	6.337	.000
Within Groups	521.727	164	3.181		
Total	1186.955	197			

Department of WE Class vs. Post-WE Class Writing Level**ANOVA**

PostWritingLevel

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	27.844	33	.844	.927	.586
Within Groups	149.212	164	.910		
Total	177.056	197			

WE Course Outcomes (test if helpfulness > 1; if helpfulness more than “not helpful at all”)**Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test**

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
OneCol - ClassHelped1	Negative Ranks	207 ^a	104.00	21528.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^b	.00	.00
	Ties	1 ^c		
	Total	208		
OneCol - ClassHelped2	Negative Ranks	202 ^d	101.50	20503.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^e	.00	.00
	Ties	5 ^f		
	Total	207		
OneCol - ClassHelped3	Negative Ranks	206 ^g	103.50	21321.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^h	.00	.00
	Ties	2 ⁱ		
	Total	208		
OneCol - ClassHelped4	Negative Ranks	205 ^j	103.00	21115.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^k	.00	.00
	Ties	1 ^l		
	Total	206		
OneCol - ClassHelped5	Negative Ranks	201 ^m	101.00	20301.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ⁿ	.00	.00
	Ties	3 ^o		
	Total	204		
OneCol - ClassHelped6	Negative Ranks	207 ^p	104.00	21528.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^q	.00	.00
	Ties	1 ^r		
	Total	208		
OneCol - ClassHelped7	Negative Ranks	205 ^s	103.00	21115.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^t	.00	.00
	Ties	1 ^u		
	Total	206		
OneCol - ClassHelped8	Negative Ranks	203 ^v	102.00	20706.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^w	.00	.00
	Ties	5 ^x		
	Total	208		
OneCol - ClassHelped9	Negative Ranks	203 ^y	102.00	20706.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^z	.00	.00
	Ties	3 ^{aa}		
	Total	206		
OneCol - ClassHelped10	Negative Ranks	204 ^{ab}	102.50	20910.00

	Positive Ranks	0 ^{ac}	.00	.00
	Ties	3 ^{ad}		
	Total	207		
OneCol - ClassHelped11	Negative Ranks	203 ^{ae}	102.00	20706.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^{af}	.00	.00
	Ties	4 ^{ag}		
	Total	207		

Helpfulness of Professor Feedback, Peer Review, and the Writing Center (test if helpfulness > 1; if helpfulness > “not helpful at all”)

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
OneCol - ProfessorHelpLevel	Negative Ranks	143 ^a	72.00	10296.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^b	.00	.00
	Ties	1 ^c		
	Total	144		
OneCol - PeerReviewHelpLevel	Negative Ranks	113 ^d	57.00	6441.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^e	.00	.00
	Ties	9 ^f		
	Total	122		
OneCol - WritingCenterHelpLevel	Negative Ranks	27 ^g	14.00	378.00
	Positive Ranks	0 ^h	.00	.00
	Ties	1 ⁱ		
	Total	28		

Test Statistics^b

	OneCol - ProfessorHelpLevel	OneCol - PeerReviewHelpLevel	OneCol - WritingCenterHelpLevel
Z	-10.491 ^a	-9.336 ^a	-4.589 ^a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000

a. Based on positive ranks.

b. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Difference Among Revision Types (test if revision type helpfulness equal or different)

Kruskal-Wallis Test

Ranks

TypeOfHelp	N	Mean Rank
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HelpLevel	Professor Feedback	144	174.88
	Peer Review	122	123.43
	Writing Center	28	111.54
	Total	294	

Test Statistics^{a,b}

	HelpLevel
Chi-Square	31.964
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable:
TypeOfHelp**Professor Feedback vs. Peer Review (test if professor feedback = peer review or not)****Mann-Whitney Test****Ranks**

TypeOfHelp	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
HelpLevel Professor Feedback	144	154.90	22306.00
Peer Review	122	108.24	13205.00
Total	266		

Test Statistics^a

	HelpLevel
Mann-Whitney U	5702.000
Wilcoxon W	13205.000
Z	-5.118
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable:
TypeOfHelp**Professor Feedback vs. Writing Center (test if professor feedback = Writing Center or not)****Mann-Whitney Test****Ranks**

TypeOfHelp	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
HelpLevel Professor Feedback	144	92.48	13317.00
Writing Center	28	55.75	1561.00
Total	172		

Test Statistics^a

	HelpLevel
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Mann-Whitney U	1155.000
Wilcoxon W	1561.000
Z	-3.716
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable:
TypeOfHelp

Peer Review vs. Writing Center (test if peer review = Writing Center or not)

Mann-Whitney Test

Ranks

	TypeOfHelp	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
HelpLevel	Peer Review	122	76.70	9357.00
	Writing Center	28	70.29	1968.00
	Total	150		

Test Statistics^a

	HelpLevel
Mann-Whitney U	1562.000
Wilcoxon W	1968.000
Z	-.732
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.464

a. Grouping Variable:
TypeOfHelp

Fairness (test if yes = no or not)

Binomial Test

		Category	N	Observed Prop.	Test Prop.	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Fairness	Group 1	Yes	197	.93	.50	.000 ^a
	Group 2	No	14	.07		
	Total		211	1.00		

a. Based on Z Approximation.