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### Technologically enhanced pedagogies in Professional Writing

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#### Abstract

Development of online or hybrid options for academic content often emphasises product over process. Institutions may decide to join the latest movement without carefully considering whether particular content lends itself to such technologies. The question to be asked first is whether students in a specific discipline — business, science, or another — would benefit from technological pedagogies instead of, or in tandem with, traditional offerings. Even though the "classroom" now can be virtually recreated with hyperlinked readings, synchronous chats, and real-time interactions, the instructor must vouchsafe an enriching learning environment. One endeavor across many - if not all academic disciplines is written communication, through which students explore course content, critically assess meaning, and construct cogent arguments. Applied writing, often termed Professional Writing, weaves through the curricula at Widener University; open-access modules for at-risk students seeking a college education are also being developed with a local not-for-profit agency. Before shifting courses or modules to online and/or hybrid formats directly, Professional Writing faculty are designing, implementing, and assessing various tools: blended course design, online writing resources, and open-access outreach. The core pedagogical issue remains the astute application of technological tools to achieve learning outcomes. This presentation highlights progress by the Professional Writing faculty at Widener University for enhancing pedagogies with technology while navigating climate and culture.

#### 1 TECHNOLOGY AS TROPE OR TRANSFORMATION

Technology needs to be more than the latest trope in education. Like too many other advancements with pedagogical potential, the sweeping paradigm of educational technology teeters on banality. In the last decade alone, for instance, higher education has glommed onto "leadership" and "high impact practices" — buzz terms in the American vernacular of sound bites — as key words required for successful grant proposals, research articles, and tenured positions. These terms are not irrelevant; on the contrary, such terminologies (and sometimes tropes) supply an efficient shorthand to encapsulate pedagogical advancements.

In modern society, the potential of technology to reinvigorate and perhaps revolutionise education cannot be minimised. This potential, moreover, comes at a critical juncture, given the recognised need for transformation of local, national, and global communities of education. The United States system, a cacophony of public and private models, is one that falls short of its promise of equal educational access for all students. Upheavals in politics, society, finances, and ethics exacerbate this shortfall, whose deep root Harkavy and colleagues (2013) at the University of Pennsylvania succinctly confront: "No radical reform of American higher education, no successful education reform."

The European Commission on Education and Culture (2015) highlights that any reinvigoration of educational systems requires not only adjustments for, but also fresh perspectives on, education for non-traditional students along their "[c]omplex learner journeys." Furthermore, increasing numbers of part-time students demand greater mobility (both temporally and digitally) to accommodate their ofteninterrupted expanses of formal study. Indeed, in 2017, the Lifelong Learning Platform of the European Union called for "a reimagining of education" now.

Technology quickly became poised for a reimagining of most societal endeavours — from financial transactions and airport security to international journalism and interpersonal communication. Yet, any such endeavour can be hurt or harmed by the inculcation of technology. Quicker finances may engender scandals, greater security may discourage travel, unfiltered news may foment biases, and social media may heighten isolation. Its transformational potential notwithstanding, educational technology must likewise be astutely assessed for overt strengths and covert weaknesses. As with information itself, ubiquity does not supplant suitability. Pedagogical technology, therefore, must be selectively harnessed rather than sweepingly applied in reimagining education.

Despite its widespread use in educational settings, particularly in affluent societies, technology has not yet achieved its pedagogical potential; instead "technology is used within and alongside largely unchanged pedagogical approaches" (European Commission, 2015). Yes, a learning curve is to be expected — even for educators. Careful analysis, though, reveals other confounding factors, notably "fragmentation of disciplines, excessive overspecialisation,

and the false dichotomy between the arts and sciences and professions" (Harkavy et al., 2013). Even technology itself can be its own limiting factor when investment into a specific learning management system (LMS) constrains curricular design (European Commission, 2015).

In short, "the impact of digitalisation is yet to have a truly transformational effect on education" (Lifelong Learning Platform, 2017). Rather than digitising traditional course materials, courses using technology must focus "on activating and engaging students in a teaching and learning process through a sequence of well-designed learning activities" (Henderikx & Jansen, 2018). Fulfilling this potential requires openness to change in terms of not only pedagogy and technology, but also culture and climate.

#### **2 PEDAGOGY OF PROFESSIONAL WRITING**

#### 2.1 Overview of Curricular Offerings

At Widener University, a metropolitan institution in the eastern United States, transformational initiatives abound. Although each must navigate pedagogy and technology, some initiatives (as well as some disciplines) encounter more resistance to evolution from climate and culture than do others. Professional Writing is one such discipline striving to transform pedagogy through technology — despite climate and culture. At its core, Professional Writing is the situational application of communication theory, editorial mechanics, and rhetorical techniques. Typical examples of applied genres of writing include business and technical communication; key is complementarity of writing instruction with content areas (e.g., informatics, nursing, etc.).

Unlike at some institutions, Professional Writing at Widener University has evolved from a patchwork of courses into a defined discipline. Until recently, the program had offered two undergraduate curricula: a certificate of four courses for students desiring substantiation of strong communication skills in their chosen field, and a minor of eight courses for students pursuing communicationfocused careers. Enrolment pressures, however, forced an innovative recombination of various advanced courses into one malleable course that interweaves writing skills and discipline content within community experience. (The program continues to offer its fully online graduate course "Professional Communication for Allied Health.")

#### 2.2 Active and Experiential Pedagogies

As an applied field with interdisciplinary roots, Professional Writing fosters incorporation of varied pedagogical techniques. Choices relate not only to course content (e.g., technical writing) but also academic objective (e.g., teamwork). In all courses, communication theory grounds student learning. Key concepts are stressed: awareness of audience, purpose, and context; development of structural strategies; and selective use of rhetorical techniques, notably logos, pathos, and ethos. As appropriate to level and topic, courses emphasise writing mechanics and visual design. Expectations of communication within a professional environment, however, do not fully mesh with traditional pedagogies of higher education. Although a didactic lecture complemented by slides or handouts might suffice in some disciplines, Professional Writing must model what students will be expected to deliver. Combinations of text and media, for instance, can interest students during content assimilation; subsequently, students may apply content in smaller writing exercises, followed by problemsolving activities for teams. Tailoring exercises and activities to relevant topics augments engagement.

These active modes of learning can be expanded into full experiential projects. Simulating their professional careers, students are challenged to apply what they have learned to practical situations. Rather than assigning a textbook exercise (e.g., social media in marketing), instructors might instead build several assignments around a practicable situation (e.g., proposal, report, and brochure for an area business); this experiential pedagogy, however, can be further leveraged by meeting a community need (e.g., social media campaign for a non-profit agency). For over a decade, Professional Writing at Widener University has connected with community agencies through its "experiential community engagement" model, in which students function as consultants for clients who service the community (Bonk, 2013).

#### 2.3 Extension through Technology

Professional Writing, being an applied discipline, must remain current with societal changes that shape modern careers — notably digital technologies. Availability of distance technologies allows programs to reach beyond traditional classrooms; moreover, these technologies can be adapted for use within classroom walls. In many academic disciplines, courses increasingly implement hybrid and blended approaches that essentially "flip" the classroom paradigm. Material traditionally covered by didactic lecture, for example, may be delivered digitally; valuable classroom time can then be refocused with active pedagogies.

Simply digitising traditional materials, though, is not fully exploitative of technology's potential:

Online and blended courses are not a copy of printed courses or face to face lectures, even when they are sometimes videotaped. Online learning should be designed in such a way that the student has a deep learning experience throughout the process of achieving the objectives of the curriculum or course.... Learning paths can be differentiated and personalised according to prior knowledge or specific fields of interests of the students (Henderikx & Jansen, 2018).

While some disciplines easily adapt to a web-based system, the iterative process inherent in writing mandates more nuance; minimally, students need one-on-one feedback, ideally through synchronous interactions like chats and messaging. Nonetheless, re-envisioning delivery of innovative and effective courses must address underlying pedagogies as a priority. At Widener University, the reenvisioning of Professional Writing courses through the application of digital technologies began by examining the underlying pedagogies and continues with periodic feedback and revision. Pedagogy must drive course design; technology is a tool for achieving the desired curricular outcomes.

#### 2.4 Climate and Culture Control

Clearly, technology is not the only influence on education, particularly at the university level. Like many other academic institutions, Widener University, a liberal arts institution, continues to require "general education" in order to safeguard the rich tradition of academia. Broadly speaking, general education aims to ensure that all students earning a degree from that institution are well-rounded in knowledge of the humanities, sciences, and social sciences - key elements of the liberal education model. A potentially competing influence, though, is the growing impetus to integrate skill sets with knowledge areas; as a result, many institutions are reframing distribution lists of approved courses by mapping to learning outcomes, such as quantitative reasoning and critical thinking, within a general education model. But even though written communication remains atop the list for institutions with defined learning outcomes (AAC&U, 2016), resistance to cross-listing general education and Professional Writing courses becomes problematic.

Complications arise, moreover, as curricula require increasing courses and credits; professional disciplines are often restrictive. As extra courses add to already burgeoning curricula, students face an unpalatable and costly extension of study programs. Adding community service and other requirements to the mix may further limit opportunities for applied courses like Professional Writing; too often, turf wars erupt when the focus should be on students (Bonk, 2014). Although several disciplines (e.g., business) include Professional Writing within their curricula, students in other programs may simply be blocked from courses outside the mainstream established by political climate and institutional culture. Fortunately, juxtaposition of pedagogy and technology identifies creative avenues toward achieving educational transformation.

# 3 PROFESSIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF WRITING

Combining pedagogy with technology has allowed the Professional Writing faculty at Widener University to transform educational offerings, despite a refractory climate and recalcitrant culture. These educational transformations can be categorised along three main themes: blended lessons in hybrid courses, writing assistance through web-based tools, and open-access modules for targeted community groups.

#### 3.1 Hybrid Course Design

With a full-time faculty of one, the Professional Writing program at Widener University relies on a dedicated cadre of adjunct faculty. The faculty group's small number fosters a level of collaboration that has led to incremental pedagogical innovations. And rather than bulk introduction of technological changes, faculty have redesigned course and program offerings with deliberate scrutiny as to which pedagogical techniques are most appropriate for applied writing.

#### Initialisation of hybrid techniques

In various Professional Writing courses, the principal faculty member faces scheduling difficulties; in essence, these classes need to fit around varying schedules of other curricula. Furthermore, a number of these specialised classes have limited enrolment yet still must be offered. Hybrid technology provides a solution. Essentially, content is divided into two categories: didactic materials and active learning. Audio-files built to complement the main text foster independent exploration of content; informal exercises conducted on-line gauge student progress. By deliberate design, hybrid sessions directly prepare students for in-class activities. Importantly, blended pedagogical techniques mesh with various learning management systems.

Within a blended syllabus, in-person meetings are held less often and more flexibly. As a result, the faculty member wields more leeway to tailor smaller classes that fit otherwise problematic scheduling. Furthermore, courses like Professional Writing that support other academic disciplines must respond to their accreditation requirements. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), for instance, has a vested interest in guiding education to meet "[e]volving expectations and experiences of the digital generation as they relate to the broad range of management learning and development alternatives that will be available to them" (AACSB, 2018).

#### Revision of common core syllabus

This blended model capitalising on hybrid technologies was subsequently adapted for the "Effective Business Communication" course required in various curricula. For this course, a common core syllabus was developed by the faculty to balance firm academic expectations with individual teaching styles; this core syllabus was also endorsed by faculty of those curricula requiring this course, particularly so as to ensure compliance with accreditation standards.

Soon, an opportunity arose to explore hybrid techniques nascently used in other Professional Writing courses. The primary thrust for revising the core syllabus was to accentuate digital communications, notably social media; required genres remained correspondence, proposals, and reports. Concurrently, Widener University was upgrading a dedicated technology classroom. The flexibility of movable workstations across "pods" allows rearrangements for teamwork. The instructor's station can display not only faculty materials but also student output. Furthermore, distance technologies can incorporate off-campus guests, such as community liaisons for experiential projects, as well as off-campus students.

#### Customisation of open-access text

Given defined parameters of content (core syllabus) and instruction (hybrid techniques), the faculty reassessed the core text used in this course. Texts used previously became prohibitively expensive, and an existing text customised from several sources lacked continuity. Hence, faculty searched for an alternate text that would meld with the blended pedagogical model. After a one-semester pilot of an open-access text, faculty selected relevant chapters, trimmed tangential information, and augmented examples and exercises. (As of 2018, all Professional Writing courses have open-access texts.)

#### **3.2 Online Writing Tools**

Along with offering online or hybrid courses, institutions bear a responsibility to provide academic services as done for students in traditional courses. For written communication, the common model is a writing centre, typically a campus location with tutors who engage students to practise skills for educational success. Reaching out to today's new students, however, cannot occur just through websites and emails. More critical than technology may be understanding the learning styles of the student populations (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006). Simply providing resources in online formats would be no more effective than posting hardcopy flyers on bulletin boards. Thus, the Professional Writing faculty brainstormed permutations of content, design, and layout for a hybrid-facilitated model to provide writing assistance through a cloud-based platform. Interactive, visually based tools were identified for five writing areas:

- Grammar & Usage
- Copyright & Fair Use
- Layout & Graphics
- Digital & Social Media
- Professional Tips & Advice

Despite budgetary limitations, the website was tentatively launched in the fall 2016 semester. The only glitch arose from climate and culture: website administrators would not authorise this resource because of potential competition with the existing writing centre (whose director supported the website). Unlike the administrators, faculty and tutors from both areas considered traditional and online modalities as a partnership. Regardless, a modified website was relocated to a non-affiliated domain. That initial roadblock, though, opened avenues for innovative development. The redesigned website widened to encompass the Professional Writing program, with the identified writing areas subsumed under a broader schema with three resource categories:

- Form & Function
- Tools & Techniques
- Style & Substance

#### **3.3 Open-Content Modules**

Pedagogical technologies wield a powerful potential to reach a wider audience beyond the campus: the openeducation community. In essence, the term "open" refers to educational materials publicly available under a nonrestrictive license (SPARC, 2017). Through this model, institutions can upload course materials for students to access and (in some circumstances) earn academic credit. A completely open model, however, may not be advisable in all situations. Disciplines such as healthcare with the potential to be intentionally or unintentionally misused require careful gatekeeping as part of those professions' social contracts (Bonk, 2017). Moreover, disenfranchised individuals who might best benefit from open education may not even be aware that such resources exist. In these situations, open resources should be tailored to needs of the targeted community, as in the LOOC (Localised Open Online Content) model (Bonk, 2016).

The LOOC model is guiding development of writing modules for open community outreach. Teamed with the director of the College Access Center of Delaware County, a universityaffiliated agency advocating for students seeking a collegelevel degree (College Access Center, 2017), the faculty member strategised a set of online modules for seminar and individual use. The first two modules — audience awareness and writing mechanics — were created as slideshows with linked videos and interactive exercises, with cartoons inserted for engagement with students. In 2018, unfortunately, the University's support for this important agency was cut due to shifts in financial priorities. After some scurrying, the collaboration reconnected through teaming with the Chester Education Foundation, a related agency seeking "to support educational excellence and to promote community revitalisation" (Chester Education Foundation, 2018).

#### **4 ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM REDESIGN**

Two of the adjunct faculty who participated in the program redesign contributed their assessment comments; highlights from their perspectives follow. The first set of comments refers to underlying technology, whereas the second set of comments focuses on pedagogical application.

#### 4.1 Underlying Technology

When a Learning Management System (LMS) is implemented and used correctly, faculty spend less time in the traditional lecture mode format that reinforces a synchronous communication model of information flow in real-time from professor to student.... [In blended courses, faculty] can not only "flip the classroom" as it is now widely known, but post more challenging questions online and create a variety of technologically enhanced online assignments to stimulate learning through the use of an asynchronous model of communication. Faculty who make proper use of the asynchronous time can establish effective feedback loops, adding incalculable value to faculty-student interactions.... Such data can be helpful in providing individualised competency paths for students exhibiting difficulty with the course content, or provide remedial assistance for students who are less prepared to understand the subject matter. A well-designed blended course should inherently require faculty to think about the message and its intended audience, whereby student curiosity is emphasised and critical thinking is rewarded.

#### 4.2 Pedagogical Application

When a Learning Management System (LMS) is implemented and used correctly, faculty spend less time in the traditional lecture mode format that reinforces a synchronous communication model of information flow in real-time from professor to student.... [In blended courses, faculty] can not only "flip the classroom" as it is now widely known, but post more challenging questions online and create a variety of technologically enhanced online assignments to stimulate learning through the use of an asynchronous model of communication. Faculty who make proper use of the asynchronous time can establish effective feedback loops, adding incalculable value to faculty-student interactions.... Such data can be helpful in providing individualised competency paths for students exhibiting difficulty with the course content, or provide remedial assistance for students who are less prepared to understand the subject matter. A well-designed blended course should inherently require faculty to think about the message and its intended audience, whereby student curiosity is emphasised and critical thinking is rewarded.

#### **5 NAVIGATION OF CULTURE AND CLIMATE**

As shown with Professional Writing, pedagogy and technology can be change-partners for higher education. Not surprisingly, institutions across the globe are reenvisioning curricula in modes ranging from bottom-up driven by instructors to top-down driven by administrators. A recent study of academic institutions sponsored by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) noted "that course development with new modes of teaching and learning at the course level are mainly driven by the voluntarism of teachers or small teams, eventually supported by institutional policies and strategies. Their impact is mainly felt locally, in particular units or courses" (Henderikx & Jansen, 2018).

Although an institutional vision can guide and support potential developments, a restrictive climate with rigid culture can obviate the transformational potential of pedagogical technologies, particularly in the reductionist view of the university as a corporation seeking "control of the curriculum in order to generate revenue" (Schultz, 2015). This circumscribed view challenges the nature of the university: "Contrasting narratives about the character of the university are used as weapons in conflicts over the university's purpose, its societal role, and the roles of students, faculty, staff, and administrators" (Catá Backer, 2017). Of course, financial exigencies of any societal institution — including education — cannot be ignored. For higher education, unfortunately, that managerial perspective has led to prioritising courses and programs enrolling sufficient numbers of students to generate tuition revenue. Enrolment pressures linked to revenue generation, however, can stifle optimal leverage of pedagogical technologies as society accelerates toward diversification. Hybrid courses that blend traditional pedagogies with online technologies may be key in narrowing the "digital divide" that can isolate disenfranchised members of society (Warschauer & Tate, 2018). Open education, moreover, can benefit a diverse society even if not generating funds. Hence, revenue generation alone may detract from the academy's overall mission to serve society.

Nevertheless, just as waves slowly erode walls, faculty daring to challenge tradition can lead to transformative educational models. Despite logistical and financial constraints, the Professional Writing model is again being re-envisioned at Widener University. Elements of several advanced courses have recently been combined into a team-based experience that interweaves writing skills like editing and rhetoric with disciplinary content like business and informatics. Clearly, educating a diverse population relies upon cooperation, not competition, within institutional partnerships. Through navigating climate and culture, faculty can leverage pedagogy and technology to facilitate the transformation of higher education.

#### **6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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