

TEACHING WRITING IN THE PROFESSIONS: A CASE STUDY

Saul Carliner, PhD, CTD

Concordia University
Montreal, Canada
saulcarliner@hotmail.com

Abstract

This paper describes the experience of designing and teaching an elective undergraduate course on writing online at a large urban university in North America. The course, Educational Communication, was developed for e-Concordia, the organization responsible for online education at Concordia University, a large urban university in Montreal, Canada, which wanted to add a writing course to its curriculum of online, elective undergraduate courses. The course was approved a few months before it was first scheduled; development occurred while the course was first being taught. The course was developed to run on a customized Learning Management System and involved a team with many skills, including instructional design, graphic design, programming, and videography. The eight-unit course takes a genre-based approach to the instruction of writing and adapts research-based practices into its design. Each unit explores a different genre, and uses videos, guided readings, discussions, exercises, and writing assignments to develop students' skills. The course has been taught four times. Student evaluations of teaching are positive and grades are similar to classroom versions of writing courses taught by the instructor of record. Two of the most significant additions since the course was launched are resources to assist teaching assistants with grading and a series of notes from the instructor to students to support them in starting the course. The course is in the process of being revised; the revised course will include a new unit on an additional genre not covered in the first version of the course.

Keywords - educational communication course, teaching writing online, genre-based approach to teaching writing, online instruction

1 OVERVIEW

This paper describes the experience of designing and teaching an elective undergraduate course on writing online at a large urban university in North America. First, this paper describes why the course was developed. Next it describes how the course was designed and developed. The paper closes by describing field experience with the course. Note that I am the instructor of record for this course.

2 WHY THIS COURSE WAS DEVELOPED

e-Concordia, the organization responsible for online education at Concordia University, a large urban university in Montreal, Canada, wanted to add a writing course to its curriculum of undergraduate courses.

Although separately incorporated from the university, the mission of e-Concordia is to provide online versions of courses that are already part of the formal academic curriculum. Some e-Concordia courses have already been taught in a classroom format; others are especially designed for teaching online. At the time this course was developed, most e-Concordia courses were elective courses rather than required ones. When working on a course, the e-Concordia staff works with the member of the academic faculty assigned to that course to design and develop it, and then administers the ongoing teaching of that course. All courses are taught asynchronously (that is, the instructor and students are not online at the same time) and are scheduled to begin and end on the same academic schedule as classroom courses. Unlike most academic courses, most e-Concordia courses are offered every academic term.

Students receive formal academic credit for courses. Contrary to popular belief that typical students in online courses are mature and special students, a majority of e-Concordia students are traditional

undergraduate students. They take online courses to supplement their on-campus schedules. In some cases, work and family responsibilities limited students' flexibility in scheduling classes and online courses expand options. In other instances, students could not find room in an on-campus section of a course and opt for an online section. The demographics of e-Concordia students might result from the elective nature of courses offered; the university does not offer fully online degrees or certificates so students cannot complete their education online.

Although e-Concordia primarily offered elective courses at the time, the course development staff wanted to make sure that the list of courses represented a diversity of subjects. Practical writing—such as technical writing—is a topic of interest to many students so e-Concordia sought such a course to augment its offerings. Initially, no appropriate course existed in the academic curriculum. Similar ones did, such as writing courses in the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum. But these were intended for people who use English as a second language. As Concordia is an anglophone university, many of the students speak English as a first language and do not need ESL training. The English department offered a course on professional writing but this was a required course for a minor in Professional Writing rather than a general elective like the one sought by the e-Concordia staff. The Computer Science Department offered a technical writing course, but it was a graduate diploma course specifically focused on writing software documentation. The course that seemed most appropriate was Educational Communication, a new elective course proposed by the Education Department. Educational Communication was intended to develop the skills needed to communicate the most common types of instructional materials, including definitions, descriptions, procedures, how-to instructions, and reference materials. Although proposed to assist instructional-designers-in-training (instructional designers are the professionals who design, develop, and produce lesson materials used by instructors and for self-study), the course would be an elective open to any student in the university.

As the course had not yet been taught yet, it would be designed specifically for teaching online.

3 HOW THIS COURSE WAS DEVELOPED

This section explains how the course was designed and developed. It first describes some of the practical issues that would drive development. Next, it describes the theoretical and practical foundations of the course. Then it describes the structure of the course. Then it describes the process of developing each module in the course.

3.1 Practical Issues that Drove Development of the Course

Several practical issues drove development of the course, including schedule, technical requirements, editorial requirements, and staffing.

In terms of the schedule, the course was approved in late November 2007 and the first section was scheduled for the spring-summer 2008 term, about 6 months later. The course would launch in late May 2008 and continue through August of that year. Although the entire course did not need to be completed when it started, the first two units—called lessons—needed to be completed by the time the course began. To ensure proper time for posting and last minute testing, additional lessons needed to be completed two weeks before they started.

Several technical requirements influenced the design and development of the course. As noted earlier, the finished course—like all e-Concordia courses—would be an asynchronous course. The course would be delivered to students through a proprietary Learning Management System (LMS) developed for e-Concordia. From the student perspective, they enrol through the LMS, and use the LMS to gain access to those courses—including general courses about taking courses online. From the instructional designer perspective, the LMS lets them provide each course with a unique visual identity (branding), divide courses into several units (or lessons), provide students with access to all course materials—and in a variety of formats—and provide moderated discussions related to the course. From a teacher perspective, the LMS lets instructors see the course materials as students would, participate in discussions, and initiate private chats with students during virtual office hours.

In terms of authoring, students would view all course materials through a web browser. So file formats should be standard. All materials were tested under Internet Explorer and Firefox. But multimedia was feasible. To create a human connection with students, the instructional designers at e-Concordia encourage instructors to include videos that show them in the course. But for lectures accompanying

Powerpoint slides, instructors could use rapid e-Learning development tools. In the case of this course, Camtasia would be used.

Editorial requirements were flexible. Each course was custom-designed and no two were designed to look alike. In other words, courses were separately branded. However, e-Concordia had developed some policies regarding the introductory materials of the course and test administration as a result of experiences learned from their first courses. For example, e-Concordia prepares certain introductory materials for each course, addressing the issues that arose among new students in the first several courses. For example, e-Concordia has a standard template for course syllabi. Similarly, each e-Concordia course requires a final that students must take in-person and that counts heavily towards the final grade. This policy reduces student cheating.

In terms of staffing, no one worked full-time on the project. The instructor of record—who also had experience as an instructional designer—would design all course materials. Editing and production would be coordinated by a staff instructional designer at e-Concordia. A videographer would record talking head videos; the instructor of record would record Powerpoint capture videos himself. A graphic designer would design the screens for the course, as well as the templates for the Powerpoint slides and any assignment sheets. A programmer would integrate materials from various sources. The Director of Research and Development at e-Concordia managed the team, and also negotiated for any additional resources that might be needed. When the course went into use, a teaching assistant would serve as the primary link to students and would grade all assignments. A coordinator from e-Concordia would manage the teaching assistant's work. The instructor of record would review all grades assigned by the teaching assistant, and enter grades into the university's grading system at the end of the course.

3.2 Theoretical and Practical Foundations of the Course

On the one hand, these practical issues would affect the design of the course. On the other hand, they would not dictate it. Rather, the course was developed with a clear theoretical approach to the instruction of writing, with the pedagogy adapted from research-based practices on what works in classroom instruction for writing, and what works in general for university-level instruction online.

In terms of the theoretical approach to the instruction of writing, this course took a genre-based approach. In the field of writing, genre refers to the common forms of discourse. In academic writing, for instance, two well-studied genres include the term paper and the lab report. The genres of educational communication are less well-studied, but include definitions, descriptions, procedures, and lesson plans. The benefit to a genre-based approach to writing is that it provides students with clearly defined formats, contexts, and assignments. Furthermore, students will likely encounter these genres in futures jobs, making the content all the more relevant. The drawback to a genre-based approach is that students might merely mimic the form, rather than comprehend what it is and determine when to follow it as is—and when to adjust the format.

In terms of the practical approaches to the instruction of writing, previous research offers many useful suggestions. One is a process-based approach, which focuses both on planning in advance and learning to write in productive ways. A second is a reader-focused approach to writing, which emphasizes that each piece of writing is for an intended audience and that the most effective writing targets who that audience is and what would persuade them to act upon the message presented. Another is that writing instruction works best if students have many opportunities to practice. For example, many U.S. universities require instructors of mandatory writing courses to include a minimum number of writing assignments in the course (usually one every 2 weeks), along with timely feedback.

In addition, the instructor of record learned, through previous experience, that many students have difficulty with particular mechanics of designing pages and screens, as well as the mechanics of language and punctuation. One last practical lesson: classroom students crave feedback on their writing; online students would need that even more as it might be one of the few opportunities to interact with the instructor.

In terms of online instruction, previous research offers several suggestions to guide course design. Courses should start with a clear, supportive orientation to build initial comfort with the course. Similar levels of clarity and guidance can provide support throughout the course. Lessons should be designed around the attention span online, which is shorter than in the classroom. Lessons should also be designed so students can meaningfully interact with the material.

3.3 Structure of the Course

On the one hand, few courses on educational communication exist and no textbook is available, a large body of research and experience exists in teaching a genre-based approach to writing. The instructional design team tapped into that to design the course. Many technical and professional writing courses take a genre-based approach to writing; those courses typically start with the simple forms, like definitions, and work to complex forms (which are built from simpler forms), such as reports. So this course would follow a similar structure. It was divided into eight units (some of which lasted one week, others two), each of which explored a different genre. The first lesson would provide an overview of the content and the philosophy of the course. The next several units would explore writing simple forms, such as definitions, descriptions and procedures. Subsequent units would explore complex forms, including how-to articles, reference entries, and feedback.

Rather than follow the classroom-based pattern of assigning readings and exercises as homework, then following up with a lecture, each lesson would, instead, take a different approach. Each lesson began with a short talking head video, in which the instructor introduced the content (usually using a real-life story) and sent students off to perform an introductory activity, so they could see practical uses of the form they were using. Students post responses to the activity on the course discussion board. (Instructions provide students with specific questions to respond to.) After students complete the activity, they return online to see a video that debriefs the activity, provides an overview of the rest of the lesson, and introduces the readings. Next, students would read the assigned materials for the week. The course texts are provided as e-books rather than as printed textbooks. Accompanying each reading is a Reading Guide Sheet, a fill-in-the-blank form that asks students leading questions about the readings. To ensure students complete the Reading Guide Sheets, four of the eight are randomly collected with little notice (a few days). Next, students return online to view two narrated Powerpoint slide shows, each about 30 minutes long. The first debriefs the reading and provides students with additional tips and examples of the genre covered in the lesson. The second slide show presents a “style lesson;” some explore issues of grammar, usage, and mechanics that continue to provide difficulty to students. Others explore ways to design pages and screens, and to integrate visuals into materials. Exercises that provide students with opportunities to sharpen their abilities to distinguish effective and ineffective uses of the genre follow. In these exercises, students view several sample materials and must assess whether they are effective or not. None of the samples is clearly effective or ineffective. Students then compare their responses to the instructor’s, which identifies both the strengths and weaknesses of the samples, as well as an assessment of whether the strengths outweigh the weaknesses. Most units conclude with a graded assignment, in which students must write a piece in the genre. In addition to writing the assignment, students must also complete a planning form, in which they identify the audience and purpose of their work—and how they intend to inspire the audience to appropriately act on the material presented. Because the course is an elective intended for students in a variety of majors, these assignments let students write about topics that are relevant to their majors.

Usually, writing courses rely solely on writing assignments rather than exams. But because of the concern about demonstrating identity, this course has an exam. Five writing assignments are each worth approximately 10 percent of the course grade. The exam is worth 40 percent, as per e-Concordia guidelines. It has two parts; one that assesses students’ critical skills and asks them to identify whether or not sample passages are effective examples of particular genres; the other asks students to write a brief passage. Students are told about possible topics in advance although they do not know which topics are on the exam. The remaining 10 percent of the grade provides credit for submitting Reading Assignment Sheets and contributing to the course discussion board.

3.4 Process of Designing and Developing Each Lesson

Although the process of designing and developing the course went smoothly, a few issues did not go according to plan. Because design and development started during the academic term before the course started and the instructor of record was already teaching a full load of courses, only conceptual development could occur. As a result, lessons were produced only a week or two before they were scheduled in the course. Although the instructor of record could record his own narrated Powerpoint lectures, he did not edit and produce those videos. Some resources for the teaching assistants were not developed until the second time the course was taught. For example, checklists that guided grading and, at the same time, would provide students with detailed feedback, were developed the second time the course was taught.

3.5 Field Experience with the Course

As of now, the course has been taught four times. Because the first overlapped with development of the course, the primary focus was on finishing the course materials for students. Because resources to support teaching assistants were not yet developed, the instructor needed to double-check all of the grading. To provide a face-to-face component to the course, the instructor and teaching assistant scheduled an open house for students. When none showed after 75 of the 90-minute session, the two left. Apparently, one student arrived in the remaining 15 minutes. No such sessions were attempted in later terms. Initial evaluations of the course were positive, but suggested things that might be changed.

Starting with the second term, the instructor sent a series of e-mail messages to students at the beginning of the term to help orient them to the course, advise them of important issues. For example, to ensure that online students would not procrastinate, no late work is accepted in this course and several notes were sent to advise students of the policy and why it exists. Although the pace of communication from the instructor slowed, an instructor's note was prepared for the end of the term to suggest ways that students might prepare for the final.

The grading sheets that were developed for the second round of the course proved helpful to all parties. Teaching assistants had a guide to determining grades; students had concrete feedback on their assignments. This feedback also suggested how students might focus their energies when preparing future assignments. Grading sheets were prepared for graded writing assignments, the final exam, assessment of reading guide sheets and contributions to the course discussion board.