

# Fear of the Blank Page: Teaching Academic and Professional Writing in Social Work

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**Abstract:** A qualitative study of a pilot writing course for baccalaureate social work (BSW) students evaluated the process and development of students' academic and professional writing. The course provided students the opportunity to build writing skills, develop a professional paper, and present at a national social work conference. Students and professors collectively developed a literature review, generated and responded to research regarding writing and questions, and analyzed data. The collaborative effort in the course and research study facilitated the development of their professional writing and increased confidence for continued work. The study included recommendations for curricular changes in the teaching of writing in social work education.

*In addition to knowing how to write, authors must want to write (Berger, 1990, p. 70).*

This study evaluates a collaborative professional writing course for baccalaureate social work students that was a direct outcome of students' request for assistance with their academic and professional writing. This course emerged because, as illustrated by one student during the second week of class, writing was seen as a difficult endeavor.

For me there is nothing easy about writing. Every sentence is a struggle. The process of transferring the thoughts in my head to paper is never easy. When I try to put my thoughts to paper they seldom come out right; translating feelings into words at times puts me at a loss. I spend hours going over my work and there are still times when I feel that I could have done better.

The process of writing this article was a collaborative effort between the students and their professors. The students both provided the data for this study and helped shape the analysis. Thus, they are listed as co-authors. The following work compiles the collaborative research and writing that led to the students' developing sense of academic and professional identities. This research argues for the value of teaching writing within the social work curriculum. The process of the study served as medium for advancement of the students' academic and professional writing.

The course was developed in a School of Social Work at a rural state university. In this program, all the courses in the professional sequence in social work use the American Psychology Association (APA) *Publication Manual* (2001). The use of the APA format includes not only the technical aspects of

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*Across the Disciplines*  
*A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing*

wac.colostate.edu/atd  
ISSN 554-8244

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correct citing and referencing, but also the development of clear and concise prose. Beginning in the junior year, students are required to write research papers, including literature reviews and analyses of ethical dilemmas that cite journals and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2000). Throughout the social work program, students are required to demonstrate the ability to apply course material professionally, writing reflective and critical evaluations of readings and field experiences, as well as writing that approximates the genres they are likely to experience in the field. These areas include the writing of court reports, biopsychosocialspiritual assessments, narratives, minutes from meetings, and memos.

Although writing is stressed in the university and our social work curriculum, students struggle with difficulties ranging from sentence construction to appropriate citations. Our first-year composition program stresses academic writing and addresses the concerns of our department, yet many of our students are transfer students, and a one-semester course taken by first-year students has its limitations. Our campus also requires upper-division "Writing Proficiency" courses in the major. Each department must have one course that teaches students to write in their discipline. In social work, most of our upper-division courses fit the requirements for this course. In our courses, plagiarism is discussed in-depth and class periods are spent teaching APA format, including the writing styles discussed in regard to language usage (American Psychology Association, 2001).

Despite our efforts and the efforts of our colleagues in composition across campus, writing instruction remained a concern for our faculty and students. Through interactions with field supervisors in our region, faculty received feedback that graduating BSWs experienced difficulty in their professional writing. The topic of academic and professional writing was at the forefront of many faculty meetings. Hence, even though writing was fully infused into our curriculum, there remained a need for a curricular space for students to focus specifically on their writing, to reflect on how they learn to write, and to concentrate on perfecting their professional prose. The question of whether to support students' writing by infusing it throughout the curriculum or by a stand-alone course in the discipline was answered by our department: both are considered important.

## Course Development

In the fall of 2002, seven BSW students expressed concern as they prepared for their professional careers, viewing themselves as having little understanding of academic or professional writing. They requested assistance from their practice course instructor; in response to their persistent discussions about writing, two social work faculty developed a pilot course. The overarching goal was that the research from this course would spur development of a mandatory writing course for all undergraduate School of Social Work students.

In the spring of 2003, the students voluntarily enrolled in a one- unit course that focused on professional writing. The objectives of the course included assisting the students in developing their writing skills while simultaneously researching the process. The class consisted of six seniors and one junior. The gender ratio was five women to two men. Students worked in groups to develop a review of the literature, edit responses to group generated questions, and peer-edit paper drafts. The outcome of the course was for the students to present and publish about the experience and make recommendations for curricular development. This unique project, provided pro bono by the faculty, was a direct result of student and faculty feedback and the high motivation of each student.

The instructional methodology included groupwork, individual activities, classroom presentations, peer feedback, classroom exercises on the APA format, and guest presentations. Since the class met for only one hour per week, a great deal of the students' work was completed outside of class. Class time was allocated for lectures on writing and research methodology. This included the process of developing research questions and evaluating themes, and assessing APA writing style, including the use of language and idea

development. Several class periods were allocated for library time. The group met with the Director of the University Writing Center and viewed excerpts from the film series, *English Composition: Writing for an Audience* (Berkow & Berkow, 2000) to stimulate class discussion.

## Research Methodology

The research method was qualitative, participatory in nature. The students were co-researchers as each evaluated her/his views of writing prior to coming into the course and insights as the semester ended. The students not only studied their own experience of writing, but also viewed their colleagues'. The data, including a before and after reflection of their identities as writers and a response to all students' reflections, was rich and complex and served as the basis for this article. The class itself analyzed the data, grouping students' concerns and insights into themes. Throughout the process, the students evaluated the role of writing in social work and developed conclusions in the form of recommendations. The student quotations in this article come from this data.

The analysis that led to this article was reviewed and revised by the students, and represents the class's perceptions. This process provided a sense of ownership and personal commitment (Patton, 1990). In the true sense of participatory research, the students owned the process including the research questions, the data, and the analysis of results. They thus became "creative actors in their world" (Maguire, 1987, p. 30). Finally, students requested a "reunion" for an exchange of reflections on the course after eight months. At this time, four of the students were employed as social workers.

The professors of the class (Schuldberg and Cavanaugh) took responsibility for shaping the material, taking it back to the students for feedback, and revising it. The students presented this material at the college's conference for students, and the two professors and four student authors presented at a national social work conference. During those times, the group continued to collaborate on the analysis. Their professors played the role of guides to the profession, helping students shape their insights into the language that fit the social and generic expectations for professional writing. The presentations and this article are extensions of the relationships that were established in the class.

## Student Ownership of the Writing Course

The students worked together on developing writing skills, meeting for one hour over a 16-week period. The course initially was to follow a structured syllabus, but the focus of the students' work changed. They collaboratively decided to concentrate on the group versus individual strengths. The students related that in their academic career, most syllabi centered on individual strengths and they wanted to ensure that each student had equal say regarding the direction of the work. A consensus model was used to develop the research into a paper that the students presented at the University's College of Behavioral Sciences (BSS) Student Symposium in May 2003 and nationally at the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting in February 2004. The students' over-arching goal was to have their paper published in a refereed academic journal.

The students composed the review of the literature below (supplemented by the professors for this article), journaled reactions and experiences throughout the semester, and then analyzed the data. They assessed the data for themes as well as unique areas. Finally, as a result of the data, they made recommendations for curriculum changes in social work education.

## Review of the Literature

A review of the literature indicated the importance of writing in the field of social work and the need to gain a better understanding of writing in the field in order to provide better instruction in writing at all levels of education. Educators of social work baccalaureate, graduate, and doctoral programs have emphasized the

need for students to be proficient in the conceptual and conventional aspects of writing (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006; Reamer, 1994; Szuchman & Thomlison, 2004; Witkin, 2001). The literature stressed the value of writing throughout one's professional career in social work, as practitioners, educators, and researchers (Berger, 1990; Kirk, & Berger, 1993; Reamer, 1994; Staudt, Dulmus & Bennett, 2003).

A Canadian researcher, Anthony Paré (2000; 2002) studied the role of writing in social work practice, especially how writing locates the social worker in "relations of power" (p. 63) among clients and other professionals. Paré (2002) examined how the institutional forms of writing, the "genres" of social work, "pushed the workers towards the detached professional self" (p. 63). Additionally, Paré showed how the multiple stakeholders—client, worker, other professional, legal concerns—limit the content and style of social work discourse.

In another study, Paré (2000) evaluated the role of writing in the transition of social work students from university to practice, using a hospital setting as his example. Paré's research illuminated the complexity of learning to writing in social work settings, noting that social work discourse is located within a hierarchy of texts, situated well below the medical texts of higher prestige occupations. Paré (2000, 2002) observed in both studies that social work writers felt torn between a personal and engaged text that reflects a relationship with their client, and more detached text that often felt less human. He concluded: "I am troubled by the professionalism that requires you to 'separate yourself,' to 'harden yourself' (Paré, 2000, p. 169). While Paré's research is not directly about teaching writing to social work students, because his work showed the complexity of the social situations of writing in social work, his work has important implications for pedagogy.

It is clear from other researchers that education in social work has not paid enough attention to writing. According to Berger (1990) "The absence of attention to writing is universal in graduate social work programs" (p. 69). Although there is the expectation and necessity for students to write clearly and complexly, there is limited time spent on professional writing skills in higher education (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Clark, Jankowski, Springer, & Springer, 1999; Szuchman & Thomlison, 2004). Practitioners' contributions have been vital to the study of social work. However, data have shown that practitioners received little support and resources in writing for publication (Berger, 1990; Staudt et al., 2003).

The literature reported that there are many factors that impact students' writing. Alter & Adkins (2001) related, "concerns include poor study habits, an inability to produce focused assignments, imprecise or unethical use of research data, and an unwillingness to take the time to perfect the assignments" (p. 493). Additionally, common issues regarding students writing were their inability to form a convincing argument, to analyze carefully and organize the material to be presented, to paraphrase the work read, and to use proper citation (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Koncel & Carney, 1992). In a recent study by Alter and Adkins (2006), up to one third of the incoming graduate students did not write at a level considered necessary for graduate practice.

Professional writing skills are essential for social work students and practitioners. Writing skills are inherent to social work course material, practicum, and practice settings (Szuchman & Thomlison, 2004). The ability of social workers to express themselves well in written communication has many implications for clients. It may influence decisions made by courts, managed care, and funding sources that dictate outcomes on behalf of clients, programs and services (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Koncel & Carney, 1992; Szuchman & Thomlison, 2004; Witkin, 2001). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2000) stated that social workers must commit to the knowledge base of social work through publication, and presentation of current findings. These contributions are an integral responsibility to the ethics of the profession.

The literature indicated the beginning development of programs in social work education that provided students with the opportunity to improve their writing skills. Szuchman and Thomlison (2004) recently published the book, *Writing With Style*. They stated "*Writing With Style* will assist students, professionals, and academics in thinking about and understanding style used in scholarly journals" (p. ix). Alter and

Atkins (2001) discussed a writing assistance program they began at the University of Denver. The program consisted of a writing assessment and voluntary writing lab. Alter and Atkins reported "mixed results" (p. 501), but faculty felt overall the program benefited students. Another study related that graduate students training in marriage and family therapy formed a group to provide support in writing skills (Clark, et al, 1999). The members related that outcomes not only resulted in presentations and publications, but increased confidence and trust in their abilities. Scoggins and Winter (1999) described an innovative model of teaching writing that integrates journal reflections and academic papers. A number of journal articles emphasized the importance of mentoring and the use of writing support groups for practitioners and educators (Berger, 1990; Reamer, 1994; Dulmas et al., 2003).

It is evident that social work educators have acknowledged the need to provide increased attention to the writing skills of social work students. However, there is also the understanding that this in the developing stages. Continued research is necessary to expand on the present knowledge.

## Initial Reflections

The students were asked to write about their initial feelings regarding writing during the first week of the course. The rationale was to develop a baseline regarding expectations, possible barriers to writing and/or working collaboratively, and to develop rapport within the classroom setting. Students were encouraged to share their in-class responses if they felt comfortable; all of the students volunteered spontaneously. The level of trust and commitment to the course was apparent during the first one-half hour of the semester. For example, one student's statement mirrored all: "I could use the help with my professional and personal writing skills because I have always struggled with writing." Another stated, "Little attention was given in my academic schooling to fully develop professional writing style." As the students prepared to graduate, one student stated, "we realized that we needed more . . . if we were to become proficient social workers, our writing skills would have to improve."

Fear was a common theme as the students began the semester. This included fear of writing in general, a lack of confidence, and feelings of embarrassment. One student stated,

I have always had a fear of the blank page. I have stared at a blank piece of paper for hours not knowing how to begin or how to say what I felt. To me writing is like being in a love - hate relationship. I hate the beginning process and love the finished product.

The students reported that even at times when they struggled with writing, writing was both pleasing and therapeutic. A student stated that, "Writing saved me. Through my writing I was able to examine and expunge all of my inner demons." Another said, "I like to write because writing is a healthy way to clear my head (and heart)." The students noted that the love of writing alone was not enough to gain skills in professional writing.

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2001) style of writing is prominent in the human service fields and, thus, the students related a desire to become proficient in this approach. A student stated, "We have never been taught APA and a course solely focused on writing skills would increase our skills not only on papers we submit to our teachers, but in our professional career." Research suggested that social workers were lacking in writing skills. To gain this proficiency, the students wished to resolve the conflict between clear and precise writing and the passion and engagement of personal writing. Negotiating this conflict is important in social work education because, according to Paré (2000; 2002), social workers continue to experience this conflict as they enter the workplace.

## Reflections During the Semester

Twice during the semester, the students individually responded to student-generated questions pertaining to thoughts, feelings, and ideas regarding the progress as an individual and a group during the course. Students developed this format during the second week of the semester. After an in-depth discussion of participatory research, the students chose two points during the course to evaluate and reflect. This material was to provide data for augmenting the format if needed and to develop recommendations for future courses.

The first set of questions included: What experiences shaped your writing? What are your feelings of writing and journaling? What area(s) do you experience the most ease in writing? What areas do you experience the greatest difficulty writing? What aspects of course do you like? What aspects of course do you dislike? What do you think helped/will help you with your writing the most? What do you want to research and why? What would you like to gain from this experience?

The second set of questions consisted of the following: Where did you experience the greatest difficulty as the class progressed? What did you learn in the class? Where would you like the class to go further (Recommendations)? What feeling have changed or stayed the same in regard to your view of writing? How will you maintain the passion you have in your creative writing in your technical/academic/professional writing? What was the greatest help, source of strength?

The students compared and contrasted the first set of reflections to the second and identified several similarities and differences. They related difficulties coping with their frustrations in research and writing. Several stated concern about "letting the rest of the group down by not carrying the proper weight" of group-work. Each individual stated they desired more time in class to work on their writing skills.

By the end of the semester, the students described their greatest strength in writing was the result of working together. One student stated, "The instructor and students have been very patient, supportive and encouraging." Another said, "As a class we push each other to reach higher goals, such as the BSS Symposium."

Through this class, the students discovered the importance of professional and academic writing. In the beginning, many were fearful to use the APA format. Later, they spontaneously voiced the importance of initially drafting their writing, followed by revising the style to APA once a strong draft was completed. One student stated, "Knowing APA could lead to publication." Others connected writing to improved service to clients, stating that the development of literature review and publication of research was a means to "ensure better quality of life for clients when it comes to treatment and services." To summarize the knowledge gained, another student stated,

Writing is not just about developing writing skills, but also about developing self-confidence in self-expression. In the case of writing professionally and academically, it includes developing the assurance and self-confidence that comes from examining peer-reviewed literature, and making a coherent and unbiased evaluation of one's research.

## Follow-up Reflections—Eight Months Later

In the spring of 2003, the six seniors graduated with their baccalaureate degree in social work. The commitment to professional writing persisted. To evaluate the impact of the writing course, the students developed and responded to reflective questions eight months after completion of the course. The questions included: What is your perspective of the course eight months later? What do you feel you have gained? In retrospect, what would have changed with the course and research study? What are your plans regarding professional and personal writing? What are your thoughts about the research process and plans for

presenting and publishing? What are your recommendations for a course writing in the School of Social Work?

All the students agreed that writing supported the development of their professional self. This was evident in the experiences reported. Each student related that they continued to write in employment and academic settings as well as choosing to write for self-growth. The course was described as "an encouragement." The students were urged by the professors to continue to read professional articles in the field of social work following graduation, with an emphasis on continued development of writing skills. One student stated,

I found the articles that I read this summer to motivate me to practice endurance and long-suffering, to continue to put up with my discouragements and myself. They were also encouraging to me because they helped me to develop the perspective that all writers get discouraged and need support, feedback, persistence and a network of resources, from within and from others.

One of the most important implications of this student's statement is the sense that she has moved from an individualistic understanding of her struggles with writing to a sense of "all writers" struggle and secure supports for assistance.

## Group Support

Group dynamics aided in the writing course by placing responsibility on each individual to complete tasks. The responsibility group members felt provided positive feedback while guiding the group to the end goal. Group support and feedback from one another was described as the "utmost benefit" as the students prepared their paper for the College of Behavioral and Social Science Symposium at the university. The students related that a critical component to the success of the group was the constant support of their professors and "their unflagging confidence in us."

The process of writing professionally was viewed as a successful group effort that transferred to the ability to write professionally as an individual. The collaborative process appeared to be a focal point. The students discussed the group process as a strong factor in maintaining momentum and commitment while allowing them to address openly the challenges of research and writing. The students related a reduction in "the fear of a blank page." As one student stated, "I am enthused about the article to think that I will have something published, that I was a part of this; the fear is gone, and now I can try bigger projects." The students' comments reflected the literature indicating that support from professors and colleagues in the form of groupwork and collaboration is a key factor in student success (Steiner, Stromwall, Brzuzy, & Gerdes, 1999; Stewart & McCormack, 1997).

## Professional Writing

One aspect of writing development was for the students to learn to write with clarity and precision. Group activities and writing exercises were developed by the professors to help students gain skills in developing short and jargon-free sentences, sentences that were free of embellishments. Students learned to provide feedback to colleagues, working collaboratively to revise sentences with a focus on being concise. In class, students discussed the legal aspect of report writing, noting that progress and case notes might be subpoenaed. Students understood the legal imperative in social work to write professionally and be accountable in their writing.

The students expressed concern that professional writing style might omit the human element. As one student expressed, "we might have the facts, but not the why . . . we needed to acknowledge the importance of how the denial of his or her hopes and dreams impacted the client's current situation." The students struggled with the "fact" that objective data is critical and the idea that in the focus on data, a worker might

miss the personal aspect of the individual. The three students who enrolled the year following the writing course in the graduate social work program related continual focus on writing and journaling for personal growth, and academically for professional development. The students described writing as an ongoing process, working to present professional writing in a humanistic tone. The coursework reportedly helped the students to view the impact of writing, and in turn, become "more sensitive and attentive to the power of the written word." This struggle, between the "human" and the "professional," mirrors the experience of social workers in the field (Paré, 2000; 2002) and thus gave students initial insight and language for a conflict they would experience in their lives as professionals.

The students found that focusing on writing development enhanced all aspects of their academic and professional life. One student related that increased skills in writing have permitted him to advance in school, working towards his Masters in Social Work. This student stated that growth in his written expression has allowed him to change his career from pipe fitter, "Where I relied on strength of arm, to a social worker, where I rely on my ability to communicate intelligently with co-workers and clients."

As the students reflected upon their decision to participate in the writing course, they related their need to "make it in the world," to succeed in their professional and personal goals through increased skills in written expression. One student stated, "I have continued to keep a journal in my internship with that intention [to continue to write] in mind." This student reported tremendous success in keeping a journal to address relationship issues at work and the stress of a graduate social work education. The student reported, "I can release stress by typing into the computer; it's a healthy way to cope."

## Personal Growth Resulting from Writing

The decrease in the fear of writing was described as enhancing the students' personal lives. One student stated that he wrote personal letters to his wife about topics that are "difficult to express in words; the writing helps relieve tension." Improved writing skills also helped to express "feeling and desires that had been trapped within us . . . a release, helping us communicate intelligently." Another stated, "When one reads my writing they can feel the pain and the joy." However through this growth, one student related,

Feelings and desires caused me great pain; before I overcame my fear of writing I had no way to express them in a positive way. But with all I have gained, I have lost, too. In my drive to improve myself, I have estranged myself from friends and family members.

Although improved expression allowed academic and professional advancement, the students reported that a slow and gradual process was occurring. Each of the seven students stated that they were changing within his or herself. The process of writing and gaining personal insight through the research process seemed to shed light on conflicts with the students' home culture and the academic and professional community. As the students articulated their professional sense of self and the conflicts that accompanied it, they described what composition researcher Lu (1999) terms the process of "education as repositioning" (p. 31). According to Lu, powerful educational experiences, especially for students from non-dominant cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, involve a "repositioning" of identity that reveals conflict between home and academic communities. The students seemed to have found writing as a means to develop critical consciousness, and in turn, articulate the estrangement that occurred during the process. This process supports the idea that a course that specifically concentrates on writing also gives students the opportunities, through reflective writing, to gain insight into the identity changes that often accompany higher education, especially for first-generation students.

The students related a desire to develop a research project to further evaluate the educational experience, including literacy development and the impact on their relationship with their home culture. The students' view of the world was no longer similar to their home cultures and several stated that they felt like an



outsider in their community, while at the same time, outsiders in the social work profession. One student stated,

I work in an office where I am the only Black. I hope my skills as a social worker will help me to gain their respect, but I will always be an outsider to them. Now I must find where I fit in. With everything I have gained; there are times when I think the price was too high.

This was an unexpected outcome of the emphasis on improving communication skills through writing. The three students who began the MSW programs related plans to continue to write to explore the changes that occur when education challenges cultural norms. They requested assistance with a research project to evaluate personal satisfaction and professional development that is influenced by writing and educational opportunities. Overall, the students related that as a group, they changed over the semester with the coursework, the group interactions and presentations at the BSS symposium and the CSWE APM in February 2004. However, this change was portrayed as having both positive professional and painful personal ramifications.

## Presenting

The students' interest in their writing and research led to local and national presentations. The impact of the local and national presentations was important in two areas. The students related that their confidence increased. They learned that each could accomplish tasks that seem daunting at the onset. Additionally, the students unanimously related learning that they need to be careful not to "give up" in the distraction of work that is self-inflicted or imposed by school and career. The act of presenting their research reinforced what each had learned about themselves, groupwork, and the actual data compiled. This process was transformative, providing a forum for continued self-growth that included awareness of a changing sense-of-self.

## Summary

After conducting an extensive literature search, it was evident that the development of social work students' professional writing skills is an area of concern. The literature indicated that the teaching of professional writing is still in the early stages of development and there does not seem to be consistency across social work programs. The study revealed the need for a writing course within the social work curriculum.

The area of concern addressed by many of the students in this pilot class, that is, the desire to build a bridge between self-reflective writing and professional writing, was primarily absent from the literature. Scoggins and Winter (1999) addressed these gaps and the need to end the polarities of journal or reflective writing and academic assignments. To assist students to move away from this dichotomy of personal and professional, they asked students to write academic papers and journal reflections with similar underlying themes. They found that students learned how to become critical writers through these two genres. This research was confirmed by the students' experience in the writing course.

As a result of the course, each student recognized the importance of clear, concise writing for social work careers. One student related, "book education with field experience can create a great social worker, but without tools to write it can hold an individual back from changing the system." All expressed a desire to "make a difference" in social work.

In the process of the course, there were multiple variables that impacted the development of professional writing. The primary theme that seemed to emerge was not a focus on technical aspects of writing, rather on the group cohesion. The students worked on the same project, responded to the same research questions. This provided confidence in individual and group writing because of the mutual support that focused on the same goal. Peer editing on the same topic helped to define different writing styles and provided the

opportunity to evaluate critically their work in a safe environment. As one of the students stated, "Writing skills can only get better if you take the time to get the extra help, either from a writing center or by taking the initiative to practice, practice . . . writing will only get better through time." This was exemplified by the work over the semester. A student summed up the primary theme well, "if we focus on our audience, our writing does not have to be dull. It can still be alive and personal. That is, it can please both the writer and the reader. That was and continues to be our goal."

## Recommendations

Throughout the semester, the class met consistently for 50 minutes, once a week. The students recommend increasing the time in the classroom to 150 minutes and meeting twice a week. They related that more time in the classroom would allow for greater consistency, better communication and structure, and enhance APA writing skills.

The students also recommend that writing coursework continued to be integrated into the social work curriculum. The pilot course allowed students to explore the significance of writing professionally and the importance of collaboration to attain a goal. This encouraged writing for publication in the professional field of social work. Although the students believed that the course needs to be included in the curriculum, they felt that it needed to be offered as an elective. It is important to note that these seven students were motivated to improve their writing and that is much different than a course taken "just to get it out of the way" or to complete a requirement for graduation.

As the students collaboratively wrote their analysis of the course, they reported, "this course was at the very least inspirational for most of us and reduced that *fear of the blank page* for us all." They maintained that the format of the course made it more solid and cogent than creative writing because they were required to research, support each statement, and discuss areas of difficulty. They related that the defined formatting style, that of APA, seemed to at times give little leeway for creative variety. However, they then felt that their creativity was challenged in other ways: by accuracy, clarity, and brevity.

Technical recommendations included keeping the size of the class small. One student noted that the small class size provided equity and a "constructive, rewarding . . . non-defensive, learning experience." Additional recommendations included more use of the APA manual and the use of handouts and worksheets. One student recommended paid tutors and another recommended the tutors in the University Writing Center who are knowledgeable of APA.

Overall, this study indicated that small group interactions create a safe learning environment. Many students are fearful of professional writing. Writing is personal for many individuals. The collaborative framework of teaching writing through practice and guidance is one method for decreasing this fear and increasing self-confidence. As one student related, "I know that I am not alone with my fears of writing. What is interesting is to hear some of my classmate thinking that they are terrible writers. When I read their work, I find it outstanding."

## Postscript

As a direct result of the students' participation in the pilot writing course and recommendations, our School of Social Work has incorporated a writing program. The year following this initial course, a one unit writing class was offered to seniors in the BSW program and first year MSW students. Due to the high demand for this course and commitment of the Director of the School of Social Work, the course offerings were expanded to the juniors in the baccalaureate program, as well as the concentration year graduate students. During the spring 2005 semester, 25 students voluntarily participated in the one-unit courses. This was 28% of the BSW juniors, 9% of the BSW seniors, 19% of the MSW foundation year, and 6% of the

MSW concentration year students. By the fall of 2006, the popularity of the course led to voluntary enrollment of 27% of all undergraduate and 67% of all graduate students in the School of Social Work.

The course is publicized to all social work students interested and specific students are encouraged because of their interest in writing. A composition professional teaches the course and works closely with social work professors. He has a detailed knowledge of the curriculum and supports the writing in all of our courses. The institutionalization of the social work professional writing course stands as a remarkable achievement of the students. Our current arrangement serves the students and the faculty extremely well. As far as we know, our social work curriculum is the only one in the nation that includes a course specifically focused on professional writing. In the current iteration of the course, students revise their classroom papers in a weekly workshop setting, with group interactions on pattern errors, and common concerns. Students also meet individually with the instructor to address specific concerns.

The evaluations from the past academic year were overwhelmingly positive. Thus, five sections of this course are offered during the 2006-07 academic year to allow the opportunity for enrollment for all undergraduate and graduate social work students. An assessment is being developed to evaluate the continuing increase in enrollment and the impact of the writing course on students' academic and professional writing. Informal, non-solicited feedback from several 2004 and 2005 graduates in the BSW program have indicated that the focus on professional writing has increased their confidence and ease in their social work practice.

The University Writing Center is currently providing presentations on what is termed the "Social Work Model" in teaching writing within a discipline. Several departments on our campus are evaluating the development of a writing course within their disciplines, beyond our campus's upper-division requirements. Thus, it appears that the impact of the seven initial students has far-reaching influence on our campus, and in time, our community.

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## Complete APA Citation

Schuldberg, Jean, Cavanaugh, Lorie, Aguilar, Gabriel, Cammack, Jessica, Diaz, Timmie, Flourney, Jr., Noble, Taylor, Kimberly, Olson, Sarah Nicole, & Sampson, Christine. (2007, April 1). Fear of the blank page: Teaching academic and professional writing in social work. *Across the Disciplines*, 4. Retrieved from <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/articles/schuldbergetal2007.pdf>