

Collaborative Teaching and Students' Writing Competencies: The New Pre-Physical Therapy Seminars at the University of Hartford

Patricia Morelli and Mary Gannotti

University of Hartford

Background

The Core Learning Outcomes Committee of the Faculty Senate at the University of Hartford recently reidentified written communication as a focus of baccalaureate competency assessment. In the process of discussing the goal of effective written communication for all undergraduates, approaches for fostering the development of written communication were explored by the Core Learning Outcomes Committee. Faculty members of different disciplines thought that written communication was a skill that was taught by the Department of Rhetoric and Professional Writing. First-year writing courses are taught to undergraduates in six colleges, but after the first two courses, concentration on academic writing is generally program-specific and varies across colleges. The university decided to examine the extent to which undergraduates across disciplines demonstrate academic writing competency as they approach commencement., and this resulted in curricular changes in the Physical Therapy major.

Using the *Written Communication Value Rubric* of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the university began its examination of undergraduates' written communication competencies. The authors and their Hartford colleagues are aware of the challenges and implications of using an externally-designed instrument for internal assessment; however, the AACU rubric itself is not a focus of this paper. Nonetheless, the use of the AACU rubric proved satisfactory, and perhaps most importantly, the rubric prompted much general conversation about students' writing, particularly discipline-specific writing.

In spring 2011, three physical therapy professors were among a team of approximately twelve faculty across disciplines who participated in the AACU half-day rubric training project. After training, the physical therapy faculty members were paired with first-year writing instructors and / or professional writing tutors from the university's Center for Reading and Writing, and, using the AACU rubric, they assessed a pool of papers written for required, upper level pre-physical therapy and graduate physical therapy courses. That partnership heightened awareness of the importance of undergraduate and graduate PT students' effective written communication and their familiarity with specific discursive conventions of the profession. There was a paradigm shift in the Department of Physical Therapy to embrace the concept of writing across the curriculum as a methodology for developing the requisite professional behaviors, especially written and oral communication but also interpersonal skills, use of constructive feedback, and professionalism and ethics that resulted in a change in curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Thus, what began as an exercise in applying the rubric evolved into conversations about restructuring physical therapy pre-professional seminars and accordingly redesigning written and oral communication assignments.

Beginning in fall 2011 through spring 2013, several PT faculty and the Director of the Center for Reading and Writing at the University of Hartford began developing and piloting revised pre-PT seminars that address the above-mentioned dual goal of physical therapy professionalism and improved written and oral discourse competencies. This innovation merges general composition and rhetoric studies with writing across the curriculum in the health sciences. The merger is deliberately designed to develop written and oral proficiencies in academic discourse both within *and* outside discipline-specific boundaries. Moreover, this scaffolded and collaborative instructional model fosters students' professional development in the major.

Before we discuss the pilot of the revised Pre-Physical Therapy (PPRT) 100 Seminar, the first in the series, it is important to note that this initiative is not an evaluation of physical therapy faculty, their courses, or their assignments; nor does the initiative impinge on physical therapy faculty members' autonomy or academic freedom.

The Pilot

In spring semester 2012, the required PRPT 100 Seminar, offered in the second semester of PT undergraduates' course of study, was modified to allow for inclusion of this enhanced, research-driven, discipline-specific writing. The revised course had two primary goals: enhanced professionalization of the aspiring physical therapists and improved instruction in written discourse. To accommodate for an increased work load, the course was changed accordingly: from half-credit to one full credit; from five 50-minute class meetings throughout the semester to once-weekly class sessions all semester; from no major paper written for the discipline to a research-driven paper grounded in PT theory, practice, and professional implications; and finally, from one instructor to two co-teaching faculty-the PT professor and the writing instructor. Though the primary emphasis was on written discourse, the curriculum also included small-group projects and oral reports. Both of these skills sets are deemed essential professional competencies for aspiring physical therapists. Following are the broad strokes of how the course material was divided and presented.

In the first third of the semester, which is taught primarily by the physical therapy professor, the curriculum foregrounds PT professional content, such as the history and development of the profession over time, various specializations, and professional behavior and ethics. The second third of the course, team-taught by both instructors, provides emphasis on discourse conventions in the major: searching the literature, gaining content expertise, writing in the social sciences, and facility with APA documentation. The final third of the seminar merges PT content and composition studies into short but formal APA research papers and collaborative panel reports.

To enhance instructional dynamics and contact time with students, both instructors occasionally taught the whole class. However, students were divided into small groups, and each instructor was primarily responsible for half of the groups. Faculty worked individually with their assigned students and with their assigned small groups to facilitate development of good writing and

effective preparation for oral panel presentations. Class size has been a minimum of 45-50 students, but one cohort started out with nearly 60 students in the PRPT 100 seminar.

Benefits of the New Physical Therapy Seminars

There are numerous dividends for students and faculty as well as programmatic and institutional ones associated with this model. Collaborative teaching is personally and professionally satisfying: it mediates instructor isolation, leads to cross-disciplinary intellectual community, and fosters inventive pedagogy and writing assignments. For students, this model emphasizes essential programmatic themes such as professional ethics, collaborative responsibilities, and specialization. Moreover, this model occurs at a pivotal moment for students to begin to internalize these and other professional competencies and for faculty to inspire creativity and passionate engagement. It is also beneficial for undergraduates to witness teams of faculty from different disciplines developing a seamless curriculum that emphasizes core scholarly values embedded in their majors and in the post-secondary academy at large. Prospective students and their parents react positively when they learn of such innovative partnerships in the Physical Therapy major. The above-mentioned benefits serve the programmatic and institutional goals of student scholarship, achievement, and retention. Finally, this curricular model is an inventive template that supports the professional behavior standards articulated in the upcoming 2020 Vision Statement of the American Physical Therapy Association.

Future Considerations and Ongoing Development

A similar co-teaching arrangement was used for PRPT 200, the second professional seminar in the series, which was taught fall semester 2012. The same writing instructor co-taught with a different PT faculty member, and the curricular emphasis was on the topic of access to health care, locally and globally, with attention to a variety of implications (insurance coverage, population demographics, culture, religion, economics, geography, and so forth). And, in spring 2013, the PRPT 201 course was taught using the twice-tested collaborative model. The topical emphases of that course were on specific specializations in the physical Therapy field, such as pediatrics, geriatrics, orthopedics, and sports medicine. Additionally, in the 201 course, the documentation style manual was switched from APA (American Psychological Association) to AMA (American Medical Association).

For the second rotation of PRPT 100 in spring 2013 with a new cohort of incoming PT majors, various issues such as students' preparation were taken into consideration. For instance, roughly one-third of the first-year pre-PT students were enrolled in a University of Hartford FIG (First-year Interest Group, or, learning community) that links Rhetoric and Writing I with Psychology 101, also required for first-year pre-PT majors. The remaining two-thirds of PT majors are enrolled among approximately 30 other sections of Rhetoric and Writing I. Thus, the two PRPT 100 faculty are better prepared to accommodate and compensate for the rich diversity of first-year writing instruction. Moreover, a deeper immersion within the content of the physical therapy program is planned for future courses, one which modifies the piloted in-class activities and replaces less successful ones with more appropriate ones, such as role-playing exercises.

The PRPT 100 instructors continue to improve the merger of their two academic cultures, one immersed in physical therapy content and the other immersed in composition and rhetoric.

After reaching the two-year benchmark for the collaborative teaching model of the undergraduate physical therapy seminars, the department met for informal analysis and discussion of future development of the seminars. Largely because instructors have seen improvements in students' professional behavior and because the writing instructor who has followed one cohort for three courses can see consistent improvement in students' research-driven academic discourse, the collaborative instructional template remains in place. Physical therapy faculty are enthused by collaborative instruction and are committed to the pedagogical principles of this initiative. The team of faculty and the department as a whole have just begun to capture useful data, so efficacy of this initiative continues to emerge beyond that which is informal and anecdotal.

At the program level, more consideration perhaps needs to be given to expansion of this initiative. AACU competencies, both written and oral, can be articulated and assessed more decisively. More training needs to be done within the PT department, so both the PT and writing faculty move forward with ease and so PT degree candidates receive optimum instruction in both the professional content and academic discourse conventions. And, ultimately, it would be an ideal student-centered initiative if this template were adopted by other majors in other colleges at the University of Hartford. Teaching partnerships that merge disciplinary content and academic writing conventions are personally satisfying and professionally rewarding. Such instructional alliances scaffold both undergraduate programs and the university's global mission for enhanced learning outcomes. The intersection of course content and academic discourse yields deeper critical thinking and heightened disciplinary proficiency. Thus, enrollment in the Pre-Physical Therapy Professional Seminars requires aspiring physical therapists to become fully professionalized. We require that they are fully responsible for their personal and professional actions and for the scholarship of their written and oral academic communication. This collaborative, cross-disciplinary pedagogical model helps physical therapy candidates broaden their scholarly vistas and meet goals for their professional accountabilities in the 21st century clinical workplace.

Mary Gannotti is an Associate Professor of Physical Therapy, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions [gannotti@hartford.edu; 860-768-5373]

Patricia Morelli is the Director of the Center for Reading and Writing and a First-Year Writing Instructor, Department of Rhetoric and Professional Writing, College of Arts and Sciences [pmorelli@hartford.edu; 860-768-4139]

University of Hartford, 200 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117