

Hosting Workshops at a Law School Writing Center

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Workshops are a way for writing centers to reach a wider student population and extend service offerings across campus. While planning and delivering a series of three 50-minute online workshops titled “Bigger Picture Boot Camp” during the fall of 2020, we discovered that these workshops at the University of Illinois Chicago Law School Writing Resource Center fulfill multiple purposes. They offer a welcoming environment for students to experiment with skills that initiate them into the legal discourse community, provide a different way of learning about student learning needs, and serve as a professional development opportunity for our writing center staff.



This article describes how the Writing Resource Center staff planned and executed an online workshop and suggests how other universities and colleges can modify and adapt this process. Writing workshops provide more opportunities for students to practice skills with peers in larger format sessions. By creating an open, collaborative environment to practice writing skills, workshops also allow deeper discussions about how writing skills are critical for students to become members of a professional community. More specifically, law schools also train students to become users of legal discourse, and workshops offer a space for students to enter into that discourse community and interact with its practices.

WRITING CENTER WORKSHOP SCHOLARSHIP

Studies about discourse-based workshops indicate positive effects on student learning. Jessa Wood et al. found that a 45-minute workshop targeting citation and paraphrasing skills increased students’ understanding of paraphrasing (105). Katie Garahan and Rebecca Crews analyze results from a survey of college and university writing centers that indicate the integral role of tutors in developing and facilitating workshops. Their study identifies purposeful practices for creating workshops, such as consulting tutors when

developing topics for workshops, choosing the appropriate level of tutor autonomy, examining existing materials before developing new workshops, and implementing a combination of formal and informal education to help facilitators develop workshops.

While these studies demonstrate how learning outcomes are achieved and how workshops are developed, another significant element of workshops includes introducing students to their professional discourse community. Jerry Plotnick organized a series of workshops over an academic year at the University of Toronto to encourage undergraduate students to reflect on the importance of writing in genres as professionals. Experts in fields such as journalism, law, medicine, and business hosted workshops that highlighted connections between understanding writing genres and the careers in which those genres are used, introducing students to the discourse communities in which they will participate in the future.

When students first begin law school, they are introduced to the discourse conventions of the legal community in their legal writing courses. Christopher Candlin et al. highlight the importance of learning to write when studying law because it is crucial to entering that discourse community, and introductory writing classes serve that purpose (305). There are approaches to teaching students to write effectively in law programs that focus on getting the language right, but legal English is only one element of legal discourse that law students need to master in order to become proficient legal professionals (Greenbaum and Mbali 234). Learning legal discourse is about learning to read new kinds of materials, thinking about them in new and different ways, and writing in highly conventionalized forms within fairly stable and consistent genres, like legal briefs, memoranda, and case summaries (Candlin et al. 306).

CREATING THE “BIGGER PICTURE BOOT CAMP” WORKSHOP

In creating the three-workshop series in Spring 2020, and then translating it into an online Zoom workshop in October 2020, we considered the needs of our student population during certain points of the semester, the capabilities and professional development opportunities for our staff and technological options via online workshops.

We looked to a few existing scholarly resources on workshop design to guide our endeavor. In 1987, Willa Wolcott outlined a formula for how writing centers can develop and host workshops. Based on responses to a student-needs survey that was distributed in the fall 2019 semester, we followed steps that Wolcott outlines—identify appropriate topics for the target population, establish

goals for each workshop, collaborate with departments, train staff, determine workshop format, revise materials, and publicize workshops.

Our audience for the first workshop was first-year law students, known as 1Ls, who face a steep learning curve during their first year. Many 1L students realize that legal writing is not simply a mechanical, academic exercise, but a complex and often difficult process requiring a whole new skill set, including the key substantive skills of logical reasoning, analysis, synthesis, objectivity, and precision (Graham and Felsenburg 230). Add this to the fact that many of their courses teach cases that contain arcane language, and students can quickly become convinced that legal writing is inaccessible and deliberately confusing.

We designed the Boot Camp to combat these misconceptions and expose students to legal writing outside of the traditional classroom structure. The workshop's purpose was to provide students with an understanding of the legal writing process as a whole—the “bigger picture”— and to assuage the frustrations students often feel in the first year of law school when getting introduced to the genre of memo writing. The objective was to engage students in delving into the nuances of fact identification, fact writing, and analysis. During Lawyering Skills courses, professors and students do not always have time to delve into the nuances of identifying and parsing out relevant facts—a building block of memo writing—because there is so much material to cover during class, such as legal research, citations, and analysis of accompanying case law for the hypothetical legal issues. Based on our knowledge of the first-year law school experience, the workshop became a venue for teaching writing skills to combat common 1L frustrations.

WORKSHOP SERIES DESCRIPTION

Most legal writing coursework centers on hypothetical legal disputes that students must analyze based on their readings of materials created by professors and case law. The building block for legal analysis begins with facts established in these materials. Josh, one of our tutors, began the process of creating the series of three workshops by writing two documents that would serve as the basis for a breach of contract dispute: a contract and an interview transcription. The breach of contract dispute centered on a conflict between a demolition contractor and a property owner who claimed the demolition contractor did not fulfill the terms of the contract. The workshops began in-person during early spring 2020 and transitioned into Zoom-based activities during the pandemic.

The first session consisted of identifying key facts from the contract and interview transcript and then writing a story that included those facts. During the discussion, each participant contributed a different key fact that Josh wrote into text bubbles on a Padlet.com interactive whiteboard. Then, participants instructed Josh on how to click and drag the text bubbles into chronological order. Finally, Josh asked participants to provide transition words like “however,” “also,” and “consequently,” to link the text bubbles into a coherent story equivalent to a Fact section of a legal memo and the foundation for upcoming legal analysis.

The second session explored the second step in legal analysis: crafting rule statements. Rules are formulas for making a legal decision and to “identify the legal consequences that flow from the specified factual conditions” (Neumann 22; Kunz and Schmedemann 31). Josh used Padlet’s interactive movable text bubbles to share a list of rule statements based on an Illinois contract statute. The list was not in order, so Josh challenged the students to put the rules in order, starting from broad propositions and then narrowing into specifics. Each participant took turns moving the text bubbles in order on the screen and discussing their reasoning for the order, and Josh asked questions and posed solutions if the rules were not in the correct order.

The third session was a role-playing game in which students acted as attorneys delivering mini-oral arguments before Josh, who played the judge, to show how they applied the facts of the case to the rule statements created in session two. Students drafted quick outlines that linked rule statements to case facts and spoke for one minute to convince Josh that their client was not liable for breach of contract.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

The Bigger Picture Boot Camp resulted in multiple benefits including professional development opportunities, valuable observations on student engagement, survey data, and pragmatic takeaways related to scheduling and ideas for future workshops.

The Workshop as a Professional Development Opportunity

The professional development outcome of the workshops reflects Garahan’s and Crews’ study conclusion that workshops are a “salient venue for professionalization.” Training Josh to deliver the workshop included several of the protocols outlined by Garahan and Crews, such as teaching him to ask good questions, helping him to manage the workshop time, assessing comprehension, and vary-

ing instructional activities; our director also observed Josh during a practice presentation.

In the weeks prior to the first workshop, two advisors with teaching experience led Josh through the process of developing a lesson plan based on the backward design method created by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. This method focuses instruction on three phases: identifying the desired results of what students should know, understand, or be able to do; determining what the instructor will accept as evidence for student achievement of desired learning outcomes; and planning future learning experiences that support learners as they come to understand important ideas and processes. Based on this theory, Josh identified what students should accomplish for each session and created assessments to determine how students are reaching those goals.

As part of this professional development phase, Josh delivered three practice demonstrations to rehearse his lessons while the director and staff acted as students participating in activities. After the demonstrations, we offered feedback on pacing and content, advising him how to revise the workshop material and effectively scaffold activities. In the process of rehearsing the workshop activities, Josh experienced how backward design can scaffold instruction so students build upon prior knowledge. This is key since the 1L participants were already taking Lawyering Skills courses but needed another venue in which to practice and experiment with writing and critical thinking skills. As a professional development opportunity, designing and presenting this workshop series empowered Josh to hone his skills in teaching small groups (one session hosted 12 participants) and organizing learning experiences that involved individual activities, small group activities, and large group discussion.

Student Engagement

By incorporating time for discussion during the workshop, Josh also created a safe place for students to vent concerns about coursework and compare learning experiences; in this way, the workshop also provided emotional support for first-year students and a venue to address common misunderstandings about genre expectations.

In conversations during and after the workshop, students asked questions they may not have felt comfortable asking during their legal writing classes: what is the point of structuring legal analysis in an IRAC (Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion) format? What is the role of a memo document in a law office? This allowed Josh to explain how lawyers write memos for a particular audience (a su-

pervising attorney) as a way to gain a quick understanding of a complex legal issue and the rules that govern possible solutions to the issue. Students then were able to understand a memo within a “bigger picture” rhetorical context: who is reading the memo, under what circumstances, and for what purposes. This discussion, although not directly related to facts, rules, and analysis, showed that students are curious about a “bigger picture” issue like audience awareness, and inspired the creation of an “Audiences Workshop” for spring 2021.

Information gleaned from the post-workshop survey supports these observations. The survey measured levels of satisfaction on a Likert scale. Ninety percent of the survey takers reported “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statements describing overall satisfaction with the workshop. A few students wrote short answers to the final question. In one positive response, a student wrote: “I thought this workshop was great and extremely helpful. Instructor was kind, knowledgeable and fun to work with.” Another survey respondent wrote: “I am happy the workshop gave a head-start on learning to address points in a case’s background to argue for the client, and in pulling law to help establish why a client should win.” The survey results indicated that students appreciated an extra opportunity to experiment with legal writing processes and skills outside the classroom and one-to-one sessions.

While the post-workshop survey results were positive, we did not receive a large number of responses. We sent an email a few days after the workshop and got very low survey participation, so we learned it is best to introduce the survey to students before they leave the last session to get maximum participation. So, in the next iteration of the workshop, we will distribute a QR code to students so they can complete the survey before they leave the workshop, to get full participation from all students and more accurate results about student reactions.

Planning for Future Workshops

We also learned two major lessons about scheduling and about the need for more venues of discussion for law students. We noticed that participation decreased by half after the second workshop. A few students in the last workshop mentioned that some of their colleagues had skipped the workshop to study for exams. In response to this scheduling conflict, we moved the workshop schedule up a week so it would not conflict with the exams. During casual conversations after the workshop, multiple students asked if the Center would offer workshops on Fridays or Saturdays. There are no classes scheduled on Fridays, and Saturdays are a popular study

day; it is also a day when many of our working students have a day off and more time to participate in workshops. Based on this feedback, we moved workshops to Saturdays during spring 2021 and saw a 30% increase in participation.

Overall, our observations suggest students felt that their frustrations were heard by someone who recently had similar experiences in law school. Students felt empowered to speak candidly about the obstacles to their writing in a venue where they were not being graded or evaluated, and they were excited to have their questions answered by a friendly, understanding legal writing expert. Most significantly, we noticed that students were thinking about the materials in ways that differed from how they thought about them during coaching sessions and were beginning to understand how and why conventionalized forms of writing, like memos, are critical to the legal profession.

CONCLUSION

Our experience with planning and hosting the Bootcamp Workshop Series demonstrated that workshops are valuable for law school and graduate level writers, as well as for writing center tutors. Planning and developing the workshop itself proved to be a valuable professional development opportunity for Josh by giving him experience with large-group instruction. While students found the experience valuable, we also gained valuable insights about our students from the post-workshop survey. These results demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of the work writing centers already do on college campuses nationwide to provide services that close the gaps between what students experience in classes and the skills they are able to practice outside the classroom.

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