Final Report

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**Improving Undergraduate Disciplinary Writing with Course Embedded Writing Fellows**

Action Plan for Improving Disciplinary Writing

Old Dominion University

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# Project Summary

The project entitled “Improving Undergraduate Disciplinary Writing with Course Embedded Writing Fellows” addressed the need to improve upper-division undergraduate students’ disciplinary writing by focusing on the relationship among course-embedded writing fellows, students, and instructors in W-classes. We believe(d) that research is needed in the efficacy of this writing-support model, particularly through its use of guided, student-generated reflection. A key component of formative feedback, these reflections were included in this pilot writing support program, as this practice supports knowledge transfer by promoting metacognitive work. Self-assessment was structured to be a cornerstone of the writing fellow’s work as part of W-course support, along with writing tutoring, all of which directly or indirectly addressed the IDW’s SLOs.

We (Elizabeth Vincelette and Jamie Henthorn) needed financial and staff support to pilot this program because ODU’s current writing support model (Student Success programs and the Writing Center) lacks the staff and availability to support W-classes for structured one-on-one writing tutoring. We believed that through pairing course embedded writing fellows (WFs or WFs) with W-class instructors, this pilot project would fill a gap in IDW support across campus, helping students and faculty achieve IDW SLOs.

Eight W-class instructors (one from each college) were recruited to participate, including the following: Lesley Greene, Biochemistry Lab 441W; Shenita Brazelton, Intro to Public Law 301W; Chung Hao Chen, Electrical Engineering 485 W; Tiffany Cooley, Human Services 343W; Stacy Ringleb, Mechanical/Aeronautical Engineering 434W; He Wu, Information Technology 360W; Chris Osgood, Biology 405W; and Michelle Redmond, Sports Management 450 W.

Instructors worked with WFs to schedule workshops, classroom visits, and due dates. Unlike Writing Center (WC) tutors, who are graduate students with paid assistantships, writing fellows (WFs) were upper division undergraduates (with one exception), and they were paid hourly. Fellows were recruited from English courses and had to show excellence in writing with at least a 3.0 GPA.

WFs in this pilot program trained with the WC Director, Elizabeth Vincelette, and former Assistant Director and English Instructor, Jamie Henthorn, on tutoring techniques; WFs attended several W-classes to understand the writing assignments; worked with W-class instructors to design course specific writing strategies; conducted several in-class reflections, workshops, and surveys; and held weekly office hours for one-on-one and group tutoring. Importantly, fellows did not grade papers, lecture for courses, substitute for the instructor, or teach subject matter. As trained writing support personnel, the fellows reinforced disciplinary writing not only across disciplines, but provided cross-over benefits for instructors and students.

We taught specific strategies in our training for both WFs and faculty, such as (a) scaffolding techniques for formative feedback; (b) how to use student reflective writings, especially what Yancey (1998) calls *constructive reflection*, which comes “between and among the drafts” (51) as part of formative feedback; (c) how to apply the IDW rubric to feedback throughout a semester, including the use of student reflection as part of an overall structured feedback loop; (d) and best practices for embedded tutoring. Separately from training, participating fellows created timelines with instructors and set goals to align with individual W-course instructors’ needs.

The assessment plan included focus groups with course embedded writing fellows; key informant interviews of participating faculty members; surveys administered to the undergraduate students; and student-generated reflections (artifacts). This assessment plan incorporated all aspects of the QEP/IDW rubric, with particular emphasis on the sixth item, student reflection and evaluation.

# Action Project data assessment and findings

## Alignment of the Action Project with the six IDW Student Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes for this proposal overlapped with those of IDW. For the WF Program we created learning objectives for students and faculty and incorporated the following learning outcomes:

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| **WF Learning Objectives** | **IDW SLOs** |
| The student will be able to... | The instructor will be able to… | The student will be able to... |
| * compose reflections on their writing, articulating learned writing skills, strengths, and areas needing improvement;
* synthesize information learned through writing support workshops and tutoring, from topic selection through to revision strategies (see IDW SLOs);
* improve writing via reflective practice, goal-setting, and revision based on reflections;
* demonstrate increased engagement in the writing process;
* increase communication with their professors about writing;
* integrate skills and knowledge gained through the CEWF program with those learned in other classes
 | * receive training in formative feedback techniques, and thereby provide more opportunities for writing in the course;
* provide more opportunities for revision;
* receive writing support through workshops and activities, in turn providing writing lessons integrated with writing fellow support;
* gauge students’ writing needs and strengths, enabling more targeted teaching;
* develop techniques to continue applying these methods in future courses
 | * clearly state a focused problem, question, or topic appropriate for the purpose of the task;
* identify relevant knowledge and credible sources;
* synthesize information and multiple viewpoints related to the problem, question, or topic;
* apply appropriate research methods or theoretical framework to the problem, question, or topic;
* formulate conclusions that are logically tied to inquiry findings and consider applications, limitations, and implications, and;
* reflect on or evaluate what was learned
 |

The WF program’s work aligned with the IDW rubric and with the following selected Writing Center tutoring SLOs: (a) to increase engagement of students in the writing process; (b) to extend and support classroom writing lessons; and (c) to promote multi-modal composition of student reflections. The student-written reflections served as a formative assessment strategy and were not tied to a final grade on an assignment, per existing research (Baer, 2008; Bardine & Fulton, 2008; Dochy et al, 1999; Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Longhurst & Norton, 1997). Unlike summative assessment, meant to evaluate performance at the end of a process (usually when grades are assigned), formative assessment is intended to build mastery. Formative feedback can be applied in any discipline. The principles behind the methods and methodology involved reflect the same principles in IDW overall, and, particularly, in the rubric.

In the WF program, SLO #6 was featured, but we also trained instructors in the entire IDW rubric. The IDW rubric is central to all aspects of writing support upheld in tutor training activities in the Writing Center (and therefore in WF training). In other words, writing tutoring/training/support by nature varies widely and touches on *all* aspects of the IDW SLOs. Furthermore, fellows supported faculty by offering extra assistance to student with accessibility needs or those learning English. Instructors compared papers from before tutoring to papers from after CEWF support.

## Data Collection

To begin this research, we started with the following research questions:

1. How can the Writing Center better support W-classes?
2. Could a Writing Fellows Program help students to better understand their own writing?
3. Does involvement of the writer in the “feedback loop” of constructing reflection reports (Larrance & Brady, 1995) stimulate retention and allow for better transfer?
4. How does reflective practice result in better learning outcomes in W-classes?

We felt that mixed methods inquiry would study the impact of student-written reflections after writing tutoring sessions. An experimental design involved assigning some students to use the treatment condition (users prompted to compose reflections) and some to the control condition (users who will not compose reflections). The following data collection methods were used:

1. Focus group with course embedded writing fellows
2. Key informant interviews of participating faculty members
3. Focus groups with undergraduate student participants
4. Survey administered to the undergraduate students
5. Student-generated reflections (artifacts)

Student writing and instructor feedback were loaded to Blackboard.

Data from students were collected through [a survey](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScotmvtR469FKynU65Meht8M0YGHovX9GTY2VeIMfsftViaMg/viewform?usp=send_form#start=invite) that was sent to students using Google Forms. All students from the six instructors’ classes were invited to participate through an e-mail invitation. The survey consisted of 16 questions, with a mixture of Likert-scale responses, questions with write-in comments, and other types of prompts.

During the same semester that students responded to the survey, we conducted focus groups with students, as well as separate semi-structured key-informant interviews with five of the six instructors. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants in this study. Open-ended questions were used in order to encourage the students’ and instructors’ perspectives on writing fellows’ support, with a goal of maintaining a conversational experience. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The focus group questions for students focused on instructors’ use of writing fellows’ tutoring support and student perception of the tutoring.

**For student focus group questions, the following questions were asked:**

How would you describe the communication between you and your faculty partner?

How did you manage communication with the students?

How many students did you help?

Did you see that the students thought embedded tutors were something they needed?

What are some ways we could get more people to come see you?

What were the major writing problems you saw with the students you worked with?

What are successes you saw working with students?

What are other ways to structure embedded tutoring to make it better?

**For faculty, the following questions were asked:**

How long have you been teaching W courses?

What are the big issues?

What resources do you have from your department?

What resources do you think might help your W-class instruction?

Did your embedded tutor meet students?

Did you get the impression that students saw the embedded tutor as something that they needed?

Was it easy to communicate with the tutor?

Was it easy to communicate students about the hours?

Did you get the impression that the students visited the tutor?

If we were to make recommendations to people who had resources, what recommendations should we make?

## Data Analysis Methods

### Surveys

Students reported feeling comfortable seeing the writing fellows’ tutoring support, but the number of respondents to the survey was so low that generalizations are not possible. Again, although we cannot draw conclusions from the survey responses, those who participated for the most part had positive experiences; however, several students remarked that they would have found it more helpful had their writing fellow known the subject material for the course.

### Student Focus Groups and Faculty Interviews

While 77.5% of students reported that they are comfortable seeking out help from an embedded tutor, only 22% of students surveyed visited their tutor. Students reported a variety of reasons for not visiting the tutor, ranging from forgetting about the program to being happy with ‘just a C’ in the class. Over 87% of students reported that the felt prepared or very prepared for their writing intensive courses, reporting that they were prepared for these courses through general education writing courses in high school and college. This is in contrast with how professors saw the preparedness of their students, shown below.

Students typically visited their WF in the later part of the writing process, typically in the revision and editing stage.

Figure 1. Reasons students visited the WF (called ET in survey)



## Discussion of Findings

**Faculty interview data suggested the following themes:**

Theme 1: *Frustrations with students’ knowledge of writing in upper-division courses.*

* Students’ lack of knowledge and preparation, especially concerning disciplinary conventions, including citation styles (APA, IEEE, etc.).
* Students’ difficulty with knowing how to and when to cite sources.
* Student’s struggle to synthesize ideas.

Theme 2: *Lack of and desire for more resources for students and instructors.*

* Limited resources from university or departments beyond IDW grants.
* Difficulty understanding available resources at ODU overall.
* Problems with large class size and need for smaller classes for writing-intensive.

Theme 3: *Feeling concerned about student apathy.*

* Students not seeming to care about writing.
* Students needing grades or extra credit to participate in visits to writing fellows (lack of motivation beyond the grade).
* Students stopping visits to writing fellows once desired grade seemed to have been met.

Theme 4: *Communication with students and writing fellows about the service varied.*

* Success with communicating with writing fellows via email.
* Few in-person meetings with writing fellows.
* Difficulty knowing usage by students (i.e., how many went to the writing fellow).

Theme 5: *Desire for restructuring W-classes.*

* Need for more student preparation.
* Need for smaller class size.
* Need for T.A.s to manage writing volume.

**The following themes emerged during analysis of the writing fellows focus group data:**

Theme 1: *Communication with faculty was minimal.*

* Most fellows met once with their faculty member.
* Communication was better at start of semester and then declined.
* [One student experienced frequent communication.]

Theme 2: *Communication with students was difficult.*

* Writing fellows experienced varying degrees of communication with students.
* Writing fellows’ inclusion in course emails and Blackboard varied widely.
* Best results when fellows communicated by email with students directly.

Theme 3: *Students seemed to appreciate the writing fellows’ services.*

* Students from all classes met with the WFs.
* Some students became “regulars” and sought frequent help.
* Students seemed to participate more with tutors who had taken similar classes.
* Students participated more in classes in which the faculty member communicated more with the WF.

Theme 4: *Students demonstrated need in certain areas more than others.*

* Students who are learning English sought writing help more often than students who were not learning English.
* Students needed help with citations styles, including structuring documents and formatting.
* Students needed help understanding directions.

Theme 5: *Writing fellows found the experience rewarding.*

* WFs were motivated when students sought regular help because they could see improvement.
* WFs enjoyed teaching students about details of writing students didn’t know.
* Several WFs wanted to continue their work as volunteers in the Writing Center or for the professors for whom they worked as WFs.

## Limitations

We believe that the use course-embedded writing fellows improves writing instruction and student learning, yet there are limitations to our study. Students self-selected for participation in the surveys, and therefore volunteer bias is an issue. The small sample size also limits the degree to which these findings can be generalized.

In addition, we could not check directly for improvement in writing because we had limited data directly related to writing that we could use to compare for pre- and post- assessment. Having this study occur during one semester also prevented us from doing pre- and post- assessments because the study did not occur on a yearly calendar.

Writing fellows reported low numbers of student participation, yet when we consider the overall small number of students involved, even seeing 4 out of 16 students from one course in a semester is significant. (In part, we base this observation on the overall representation of the number of students who visit the Writing Center from any one course during a semester.)

The number of student respondents to the survey was so low that generalizations are not possible. Again, although we cannot draw conclusions from the survey responses, those who participated for the most part had positive experiences; however, several students remarked that they would have found it more helpful had their writing fellow known the subject material for the course.

Both the writing fellows and the participating faculty reported student apathy as a limitation, and we believe this factor more than any other may have contributed to difficulty encouraging more students to use the service.

As principal investigators, we experienced tremendous problems from our difficulty communicating with many of the participating faculty members; this problem dramatically affected our ability to collect useful data. We also received no follow up on our transcriptions from the SSRC, which led to our inability to procure those documents before our budget deadline. Managing administrative documents for the WFs was time-consuming and far more than anticipated. The administrative overload led to an error on our part in screening the fellows (allowing one freshman to participate in the program), as well as ongoing problems managing personnel issues such as pay.

# Recommendations and Conclusion

For future studies using course-embedded writing fellows, we would recommend that a larger sample of faculty and students be recruited in order to produce more generalizable results. In

addition, we would conduct this study over a longer period of time in order to be able to have pre- and post- data.

A future study should seek writing fellows who write well *and who are from the same general course of study as students in participating classes*. In general, the Writing Center model—English graduate students supporting writing for all majors—was not as successful in an embedded writing model that used undergraduate English majors in a variety of courses. A model more like that of the Peer Educator Program—using students who had already successfully taken the supported course—would be a more viable long-range set-up for this type of writing tutoring. At the same time, it is a reality that many W courses are taken in the last semester of undergraduate education and many disciplines may not have access to students who have taken the course.

We also believe that both faculty and writing fellows would benefit from extended training, which would require more time and resources. More regular, structured communication needs to occur between the WFs and the instructors, as well as between the instructors and the PIs. Meetings in which both the participating faculty member and their writing fellows are present with PIs (or other program administrator) would facilitate better communication.

Because of our difficulty managing administrative matters, we also recommend that PIs (or whomever administrates a program of this sort) seek and receive more support for personnel management, including scheduling, tutor hiring, and payroll.

With that in mind, we concluded that in order to successfully administer a program of this type, we recommend the support of a full department or office, such as the Peer Educator Program (or similar model).

This pilot project, though small, did suggest the viability of an embedded tutoring program at ODU. The project met objectives of ODU’s new Strategic Plan for 2015 by specifically addressing Goal #2: *Support Student Success from the first point of contact through graduation and beyond*. Objective #2 in support of Goal #2 (Action Item i) focuses on retention, specifically to “support, enhance and assess existing and new high impact practices and programs to improve retention and graduation rates and assess course supply and demand to maximize seat management.” As defined by the AAC&U, W-classes are high impact practices, and by extension, development of this W-class fellows program targets this aspect of the Strategic Plan. Additionally, the CEWF program also supports Action Item v., which seeks to “expand academic support and incentives for students to enhance their learning and critical thinking skills and success post-graduation, by participation in tutoring, supplemental instruction, writing instruction, academic coaching, and peer mentoring in gateway programs; develop and assess options for student awareness and responsibility for learning.” Finally, this project addressed Objective 3, as well, by “Maximiz[ing] student engagement and . . . satisfaction” through Action Item I, to “increase opportunities for students to interact with faculty outside, as well as within, their discipline.”

Despite limitations, we believe that this is a sustainable project with potential for widespread impact across the University in all colleges at ODU, *provided there exist significant administrative support and resources.*

## Sample materials developed and used

[Tutor Training Materials can be found here.](http://et.digitalodu.com/tutor-training-materials/)

# [Faculty Training Materials can be found here.](http://et.digitalodu.com/faculty-training-materials/)

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