

Group Writing Tutorials: Implications for Teaching/Learning Discipline-Specific Writing



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I write to discover what I know.

Mary Flannery O'Connor

In baccalaureate nursing education, writing is used to...

Acquire knowledge ^{1,2,3}

Develop critical thinking skills ^{1,2,3}

Communication ⁴

Foster critical understanding of research ⁵

Reflexivity ⁶

Incorporate evidence into practice ⁶



Greatest improvements in student writing occur when students engage in content-specific, peer-group writing collaboration

1. Do students who attend discipline and course-specific group writing tutorials earn higher grades than do students who did not attend?
2. What student characteristics predict higher grades among tutorial attendees?



Research questions

- ☀ All students received **in-class instruction** about a specific writing assignment
- ☀ Students who consented to participate in the study provided informed consent and completed a survey
- ☀ **In-class instruction** involved exercises to help students understand the assignment and begin brainstorming, outlining, and drafting the assignment
- ☀ 49 sessions were offered in 2012-13 to students in 24 disciplines

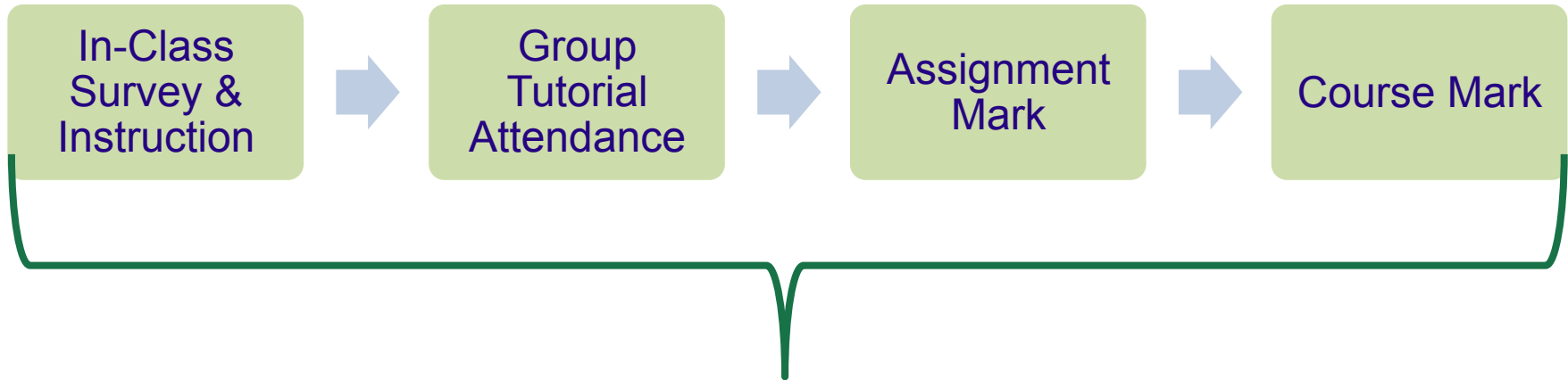
☀ The **small group tutorials** were optional and free

☀ Consisted of ~10 students + writing tutor and the focus was linked to the in-class instruction

☀ Attendance was limited to students in a particular and course

- ☀ 857 students were recruited into the study
- ☀ We had complete data for 553 students
- ☀ Of those 553 students, 165 attended both the in-class lecture + the group writing tutorials and 288 attended only the in-class lecture
- ☀ In our analysis, we compared
 - [in-class lecture + the group writing tutorials] (n=165)
 - vs
 - [in-class lecture only] (N=288)

Undergraduate Courses



- Describe the students who attended the group tutorial
- Describe the students who got better marks in the assignment and the course
- Identify what factors impacted student assignment marks

Group Tutorials:

- ☀ Increase the odds of students not getting a D/F on their assignment
- ☀ Seems to impact a different group of students than those who attend the Writing Centre
- ☀ Have a marked positive impact for students with work/family responsibilities
- ☀ Do not have an impact on marks for ESL students

Social interaction is a critical element of learning to write.

Learning to write is a process of enculturation into a particular community of practice ⁷, mediated by language and embedded in a socio-historical context.

Through dialogical interaction, personal and cultural meanings are negotiated; knowledge is structured, and re-structured; and personal and professional identities are transformed ⁸.

Implications

1. Should we follow the Australian model of "embedding" writing-in-the-discipline? [writing studies course vs. English]
2. If only the best students transfer knowledge from a general writing course to writing in their discipline, what interventions should we design for the average and poor students?
3. If writing centre tutorials and textbooks do not help performance on discipline-specific assignments, is that because they are too far removed from the immediate context of the writing situation in the course?
4. If the second language speakers actually do better than native speakers on assignments following group tutorials, what role should these tutorials play in the continuing development of our international students at the U of A?
5. If students entering University are not accurate judges of their skill as writers here, how do we bring them to understand this before they do poorly? Perhaps by giving shorter assignments early in the term to get their attention?

Questions for discussion

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