

Abstract

SWC 100: Writing Practicum is a credit/no credit course in which students develop writing skills that will allow them to take full advantage of their experiences in courses at Michigan. Among the stated goals of the course are improvement of students' abilities to "organize, develop, and support ideas; analyze complex materials; and begin to use evidence and reasoning to support their own claims."

In this ISL study, I:

- Surveyed and conducted a focus group with all faculty who teach SWC 100 to learn about common instructional goals and strategies.
- Created and used CTools-based learning objects to supplement traditional writing assignments and other course activities and to enhance students' development of some of the desired skills.
- Evaluated the use of C-Tools-based learning objects.

Methods

- **Faculty focus group** regarding SWC 100 course goals and pedagogical strategies was conducted in October 2008 with eleven Sweetland faculty who have taught SWC 100 in the past or were teaching SWC 100 that term.
- **Faculty survey** regarding course goals and pedagogical strategies was conducted in the Fall 2008; eight Sweetland faculty completed the online survey.
- Student participation was solicited from the beginning of the course; permission to use coursework was obtained.
- Students completed two **CTools Modules** and paired **Assignments** regarding using concrete language and developing an idea in an essay.
- Students completed three **CTools Test Center Assessments** regarding paragraph development, paragraph coherence, and summary/paraphrase/quotation, as well as a brief pre- and post-assessment questionnaire, asking them to assess the effectiveness of the assessment in teaching the skills targeted.
- At the end of the course, **students completed a survey** regarding the usefulness of the Modules and Assessments in helping them learn skills taught in the course.

Findings of Sweetland Faculty Survey

A survey of faculty who teach SWC 100 revealed that every faculty member tries to teach the following skills in their sections of the course:

- Paragraph development
- Grammatical correctness
- Organization
- Writing a strong thesis
- Analysis of evidence

In addition to writing skills, faculty also considered important **teaching students effective drafting and revision strategies** and **helping them to develop general academic skills** such as asking better questions about their writing, thinking critically, participating in class discussions, reading effectively, and seeing themselves as writers/scholars whose ideas will be valued by others.

Sample Module

In this study, I created and used CTools-based learning objects to **enhance students' development of some of the desired skills.**

Below is a screen capture from the CTools Module entitled "Being Specific, Definite, and Concrete." In Modules, images and video were used to illustrate key concepts. In the example below, an artist's rendering of King Lear and the Fool in the Storm is used alongside lines from the play to illustrate how concrete language can create "word pictures" for the reader.

In addition to making abstract ideas more concrete, as in the poem above, **concrete language makes "word pictures"** for readers and allows them to experience a piece of writing as more "real." That helps to make it more interesting and engaging--the reader feels involved. Here are Strunk and White again:

"If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is this: the surest way to arouse and hold the reader's attention is by **being specific, definite, and concrete.** The greatest writers--Homer, Dante, Shakespeare--are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter: "their words call up pictures" (37).

Here is an artist's depiction of a scene from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Shakespeare's vivid language that describes it:

Lear: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks! You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires, Vomit-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts, Sing my white head! And thou, all-shaking Thunder, Strike flat the thick roundity of th' world. Crack Nature's moulds, all germins spill at once, That makes ingrateful man!



Implications for Teaching

- **Online modules can be a useful supplement** to traditional instructional methods for teaching writing skills.
- Students valued the concreteness of the learning objects to **teach and practice specific writing skills.**
- **Students preferred CTools Test Center to Modules** because content and practice were embedded in one tool.
- Care must be taken in designing learning objects to **present material in a way suitable for online reading.**
- Because learning objects are not discussed with the instructor, **instructions must be clear.**

Cautions

- Gaining student compliance was difficult in a credit/no credit course
- Students often completed Modules/Assessments out of sequence, limiting scaffolding effectiveness
- CTools Modules/Assessments have significant limitations for both content delivery and assessment
- Assessing the effect of Modules or Assessments--as opposed to teacher feedback, peer feedback, classroom instruction--on students' revisions of their papers is almost impossible.

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