

DC Grant Final Report
Modular Writing Curriculum to Support DC Courses in the Sociology Department
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This is a final report for a Disciplinary Communication Grant Application submitted by Professors Hillary Angelo of the Sociology Department and Tanner WouldGo of the Writing Program. In 2017-2018 (deferred to 2018-2019), we received \$30,521 to create a writing curriculum for Sociology 105A, a required disciplinary communication course for undergraduate majors. This project was completed successfully with positive results for 105A students as well as in the Sociology Department writ large.

1. Proposed project and purpose

The purpose of this grant was to provide pedagogical support for SOCY 105A, with the intention of strengthening the teaching of disciplinary writing and communication in this course. This project took up two major initiatives: (a) improving equity gaps in student performance in 105A and (b) developing faculty materials for teaching disciplinary writing.

Initially, the campus office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Policy Studies found significant differences in performance between students of color and their White, non-Hispanic peers (in fall 2016 only 56-57% of students of color “met” or “exceeded” expectations compared to 79-83% of White students). This grant project was developed directly in response to this data.

2. What we did

For SOCY 105A, we redesigned the course around three papers of increasing levels of complexity (application, comparison, and synthesis/evaluation), and developed a series of low-stakes assignments (slow reading, idea development, thesis statements, outlining, revision planning) that prepared students for each one by focusing on discrete writing skills. The curriculum itself was informed by anti-racist pedagogies and made use of inclusive teaching and universal design principles.

We also created a curriculum for graduate students to implement in their sections. This curriculum supported students’ assignments and lecture content and provided a suite of in-class activities, handouts, and materials for graduate students to implement into their courses.

As a result of this work, we used the data and research gathered to package a writing guide for all sociology faculty because we wanted to support students’ writing development beyond 105A. This guide was delivered to faculty in the spring of 2020.

3. Outcomes

- A. Reduction in achievement gaps: When students’ performance on the final paper was analyzed again after the curricular changes, while some differences in performance remained (in idea

development, readability, and use of course texts), we found no significant differences among racial/ethnic groups in their writing skills or use of social theory. Students' SETS also reported improved experiences of the class as we refined the assignments during 2018-2019. The first time Professor Angelo taught the new curriculum in Fall 2018, 88% of students rated the course's overall effectiveness as very good or excellent, 83% rated the course overall as a learning experience as very good or excellent, and 86% somewhat or strongly agreed that they'd gained a good understanding of course context. The next quarter, these numbers rose to 94% for overall effectiveness, 95% for the overall learning experience, and 94% reported gaining a good understanding of course content. Beyond these positive evaluations, a number of students commented spontaneously, and favorably, on the structure of the assignments in their formal course evaluations and in the mid-term evaluations administered each quarter. We also surveyed TAs about their experience of the course, and they reported finding the curriculum helpful for their teaching and students' learning.

- B. Sharing lessons learned: We developed a guidebook for the Sociology Department titled "[Teaching Disciplinary Writing in Sociology: A Guide for Sociology Faculty](#)." This guidebook serves as a useful resource for faculty who teach writing in their courses or who would like to incorporate disciplinary writing to better serve their students. We have also presented the results of our efforts and shared the guidebook with faculty in Sociology, Politics, Psychology, and at UCSC's Annual Symposium on Assessment of Learning (fall 2018 and spring 2020).

4. Further thoughts/recommendations

This writing curriculum has now been implemented several times in Sociology 105A, with changes and adjustments still ongoing between each course offering. The curriculum has clearly been effective. Nevertheless, a number of challenges, opportunities, and unanswered questions remain. These include:

- A. Reflective writing: It is challenging to create a culture of reflective writing in a large lecture. We designed a mid-quarter evaluation that asked students to reflect on their own learning process and provide feedback on the course's support of that learning; several of the homework assignments also contained a reflective writing element. In both the midterm and homework, while students responded thoroughly to direct and/or proscriptive questions and requests for input, the majority tended to rush through the self-reflective writing elements (in class) or not complete those sections of the homework assignments carefully. Because TAs were asked not to comment on homework assignments, or give grades beyond full/partial/no credit, it was difficult to hold students accountable for these portions of the work.
- B. Balance of writing instruction and content instruction: An ongoing challenge of this course is balancing the teaching of writing skills and difficult, highly abstract theoretical content. Many undergraduates (indeed, many graduate students!) struggle to read Marx, Weber, Durkheim,

and DuBois. Both the professor and the TAs can easily devote all of the allotted lecture and section hours to content; how much of this time should be turned over to a discussion of writing skills remains an open question. In general, we tried to keep portions of lecture devoted to writing skills relatively short, and let the highly structured assignments and section activities do much of the work, but other faculty who teach 105A have asked whether it should remain a DC course at all, and TAs have reported finding it difficult to balance these two demands.

- C. Implementation of writing curriculum: It is also difficult to actually monitor how well the course is progressing, and how well the different elements of the course are being implemented, in a large lecture course. Most TAs are happy to utilize the section activities because they save them time (i.e., the activities offer a ready-made lesson plan for section), but some are more diligent in attending to the writing portion of the curriculum than others. The TA training, when offered, was very effective in building a culture of attention to writing among the TAs, but also required resources to pay TAs for their time; because the DC grant had ended, the TA training was not provided the third time the course was taught. TAs also have variable teaching skills. Those who are only in their first or second year may have trouble balancing different demands on section time. Meanwhile, faculty struggle, too—the third time the course was taught a number of campus strikes and blackouts disrupted several lectures and interrupted the momentum of the course, and the writing skills were short changed as faculty and TAs, by necessity, focused more on explicating difficult content during the limited time we had with students.
- D. Equity: While the curricular changes improved equity with respect to race/ethnicity, our 2018-2019 revealed additional target areas to consider moving forward:
- a. Transfer students demonstrated lower proficiencies in “understanding course concepts.”
 - b. First-generation students showed lower proficiencies in “use of course texts.”
 - c. Late bilingual students demonstrated lower proficiencies in “idea development” and “use of course texts,” while early bilingual students demonstrated lower proficiencies in “readability.”

These findings suggest that there are additional target areas to pursue as this course is revised, and these considerations—use of course texts, understanding course content, idea development, and readability—can be better attended to in future iterations of the course, perhaps through further emphasis in section and lecture on these proficiencies.

- E. Transfer of knowledge (after) / prior knowledge (entering): A vacuum may occur when we are uncertain about the prior knowledge students bring with them and if the newly acquired knowledge will be reinforced in any way. Assessment results show that transfer students struggle with understanding course concepts, and unlike those who have spent all four years

at UCSC, these students have not completed the Writing Program’s sequence. A long-term goal is to think about how the DC skills currently taught in 105A relate to other courses offered by the department. Might a two (or three) course sequence be envisioned that, in addition to leading students from classical to contemporary theory, also deliberately teaches a progression of DC skills? These could be more advanced scholarly writing skills (such as writing more complex papers or engaging in more complex analyses) and/or complementary ones, such as writing for public audiences, designing and reporting on research findings, etc. 105B offers one clear opportunity for such curriculum planning; the department’s recent decision to begin offering Senior Seminars is another.

- F. Scalability and replicability: A final challenge of this approach is the question of what elements of this course should/could be carried over to other faculty who may teach it, or if/how the skills and principles we chose to focus on “travel,” both for reasons of intellectual freedom and investment of time and resources. Professor Angelo received a course release for her work on this curriculum; Professor WouldGo received summer salary; TAs were paid for participating in the program. It is unrealistic to expect that faculty will be able to engage deeply in such a process without such accommodations. Additionally, faculty teach even the same material in quite different ways and with different learning goals for their course. It is for this reason that we have written this guide as a model and a record of the process in which we engaged, rather than a specific set of guidelines regarding exactly which DC skills should be taught and how.

5. Expenses

Teaching Professor Summer Salary	5-unit course equivalency, paid over two months	\$10,712
Assistant Professor Course Equivalency (fall 2018)	Course release	\$7,807
Partial summer salary, year 2	\$5k each	\$10,000
TA Stipends (@ 6)	4-hour training @ 23.47/hr	\$563.28
Head TA Stipend	Oversee TA implementation	\$938.72
Food for TA Training	Coffee + Lunch	\$350
Materials	Guidelines for Writing (Reader)	\$150
		Project Total: \$30,521