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# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## STUDENT WRITING: DEVELOPING "JOURNAL QUALITY" OUTCOMES

### The Skills Gap

The American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) identified, then studied, the skills gap phenomenon. They defined the skills gap as the significant difference between the organization's current operational capabilities and the actual employee skills it requires to achieve its organizational goals (technical or soft-skills). The ASTD further defined the skills gap as the inflection point at which the organization was unable to maintain competitive advantage due to its inability to fill critical jobs with employees that possessed the right knowledge, skills, and/or abilities. They conducted research at 1,179 organizations, with 79 percent indicating that they presently have a skills gap within each respective organization.

Additionally, there is a considerable amount of literature that identifies—within the skills gap—the need to improve soft-skills, specific items that students need as part of their overall skill set. While the list of detailed skills varies by report or research, the literature suggests that students not only must possess good reading, writing, and mathematical skills (3Rs), they must also have a firm applied grasp of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4Cs). The 3Rs and the 4Cs, as well as the technical skills, are identified as fundamental organizational priorities for employee development, talent management, succession planning, and progressive competitive advantage within organizations.

The skills gap includes basic skills, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. Students need to be better writers, but identifying how their writing can be improved requires a rethinking of the current methodology.

### "Journal Quality"

Writing is as fundamental to college success as writing is to a level acceptable to the workforce.

Students must write well enough to meet the needs of the business community—e.g., simple reports, documentation, training guides, technical reports, etc. In other words, when we assign a technical (or other type) paper for students to prepare, what incentives do we use to entice them to write as if their futures depended on it? I teach them to write as if they are writing for a peer-reviewed journal or publication. Stated differently, I require them to write at the level of "journal quality."

I have discovered that more students than not have difficulty in composing a technical report (or most writing assignments). In my IT classes, students write a technical report for every class. While this assignment is not an innovation, the methodology is vastly different from the normal objectives of essays or technical reports for an English class.

I prepare students on day one to frame their writing as that typically required of a journal article. This means that they must: (1) write a properly formatted report using the APA-style, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition; (2) be cognizant that the Editor-in-Chief (a.k.a., instructor) will methodically and critically review the report as a peer-reviewed process and with consideration of workforce-acceptable standards; (3) understand that a well-written, structured report is more likely to gain potential acceptance for "publication" in a journal (translation: higher quality = higher scores); (4) demonstrate critical thinking, organization, creativity, and subject matter throughout the article; (5) submit work to the Editor-in-Chief/Publisher's deadlines; (6) apply team dynamics via collaboration, communications, critical thinking, and creativity to prepare a publishable article; (7) work with the Editor-in-Chief for support and guidance; and (8) utilize time wisely in submitting an article/manuscript to a journal or other peer-reviewed venue.

This innovative approach creates a completely different mindset to student writing. If students only write because they must to earn a grade, where is the correlation between their efforts and future applications? By having them write at a level acceptable to what publishers view as "journal quality," students will develop an improved vision of applicable outcomes. In addition, I tell them about what the job



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market will expect—in technical skills, writing skills, and soft skills, across the board.

#### Implications and Recommendations

**Technical programs are not writing-exempt.** Writing for "journal quality" develops writing skills and critical thinking acumen, as well as soft skills—particularly if students are writing as author/co-author. To allow students to write less exacerbates the problems associated with poor writing skills.

**Vary the format and length.** When students write for "journal quality," it is important that the process is flexible. The baseline from which they must write is using their skills to prepare a "journal quality" document, with flexibility to manipulate the format/length to suit their needs and/or design goals. Students not only may vary the length, but also use tables, figures, charts, or other input (including appendices). They *must* write the report as if it were to be published in an appropriate venue—e.g., *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *Community College Review*. (Journals often leave format and length to the discretion of the author or authors.)

**Encourage students to write for actual publication.** I review the types of journals, blogs, newsletters, and workforce agencies, and I discuss the opportunities to publish. This review adds validity to the hours they devote to writing. I explain why writing is important, how journals are distributed and used in the field, and why they should write as if they intended to submit their articles for review. This discussion does not change the primary goal of training the student to be an expert computer information systems programmer or network engineer or machine tool operator. The best technically minded individual must also be an effective communicator.

#### Final Words

The technical reports that students produce are precisely the documentation they can use in an e-Portfolio to demonstrate writing skills to potential employers. The idea is to instill critical thinking; encourage innovative personal writing development; provide collaborative experience with team writing; increase cognizance that "journal quality" writing is as important as the successful design of a C program, database project, or a user guide for the installation of VMware; and teach how to mesh technical with written work seamlessly so that the outcome is a viable offering to potential future employers.

Effective writing skills are but one set of skills students must master. Having students write at "journal quality" level opens their minds to the possibilities of

becoming excellent writers, of being on track to publish well, and of gaining a competitive advantage when seeking employment. In the final analysis, organizations value writing, and the skills that organizations value do indeed lead to what we choose to call being "gainfully employed."

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