Chapter 13
The Digital–Forward Writing Course:
Designing for Scale and Delivering on Equity

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ABSTRACT

First-year writing and composition courses can be major roadblocks for students as their success in later courses often hinges on their abilities to construct a quality written document. Students enter composition courses with broad variation in their abilities and yet must all meet the same standards of completion. In order to address this inequity, greater opportunities for writing and in receiving feedback are paramount. Yet such opportunities would place a high burden on writing instructors in a traditional course. This chapter proposes the digital-forward writing course that draws on a combination of a number of digital tools and pedagogical strategies that can increase writing opportunities while maintaining or even reducing instructors' time commitment. This information is drawn from a workshop held in 2020 that asked writing instructors, instructional designers, developers, and other educators to ideate on meeting the challenges of the entire student writing journey. Specific tools and a discussion of the value of adaptive courseware are included.

INTRODUCTION

Writing, along with reading and math, is a gateway skill that students must master to succeed in college—and the skills too many students lack when they start college. The role of the first writing course in postsecondary education is to acclimate students to the mechanics, roles, and styles of writing they will encounter and employ throughout their collegiate and professional careers. It also encourages critical thinking, situational analysis, research skills and the value of repeated practice to accomplish goals (Hillard and Stewart, 2019).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are vital to the instructional environment, but in writing, equity is key. The current models for teaching college-level writing do not work for all students. Today's pedagogical and assessment models for college writing set outcomes that all students must meet to ensure their postsecondary success. But the abilities possessed by each student entering their first college-level writing course are not the same. This is especially true for those who enter from K-12 districts that poorly prepare them for writing, are barely funded, or (usually and) with complicated lives beyond the classroom (Twigg, 2005). The disparities for these students are so wide that both instructors and students struggle with closing gaps and achieving mastery in the weeks allotted to the course.

Too often, students with significant writing deficits are steered into developmental courses. These are rightly labeled "killer courses" because of their high DFW (grades of D or F or a withdrawal) rates and the negative effect they have on a students' GPA, progress through their program, scholarship eligibility, motivation, and even interest in staying in college. In a study of 256 Foundations of Excellence institutions conducted by The Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (Barefoot, 2013), Developmental English was in the top five courses with the highest DFW rates at both two-year and four-year institutions. Specifically, in developmental English, the DFW rates were 43% and 34%, respectively; in college level English, the rates were 33% and 20%. Smith Jaggars (2011) notes that low completion rates in developmental courses, in particular, place underprepared students at a significant disadvantage in completing the rest of their studies.

A deeper look into the numbers shows where the challenges are greatest. A report that examined over 200 indicators, looking at who gains access to a variety of educational environments and experiences by races and ethnicities, found that by the end of high school, Black students were less prepared than White students for college-level work (Espinosa et al., 2019). In 2015, 64.2 percent of all Black 12th graders were in the lowest achievement level for math and 47.6 percent were in the lowest achievement level for reading, a pattern that remained even when considering income and parental education levels. This deficit impacted their postsecondary success as Black students in career and technical education were less likely to complete their credentials in potentially higher-paying fields.

Innovations and optimizations to our current instructional models that incorporate technology into the writing and feedback processes have great promise for equitable learning. This chapter explores the concept of "digital-forward" instruction in first-year writing and composition. In an "instructor-forward" course, the instructor is responsible for the vast majority of teaching, assessment, and feedback. However, the digital-forward course incorporates a variety of technological tools and strategies that enable more writing practice while reducing the burden on the instructor to single-handedly provide feedback. In the pages that follow, we provide details on how these tools can be used to enhance the first-year writing journey, as well as evidence and evaluation of the current state of adaptive courseware in this subject. We conclude with more of Dr. Haslip's story and how digital-forward course design would be used at her university to provide greater opportunities for students to succeed in first-year writing.

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