

Chapter 4.36

Integrating Writing into IT/MIS Courses

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ABSTRACT

As popular literature claims that college graduates are entering the workforce lacking sufficient writing skills, this chapter argues that the integration of writing into the MIS/IT curriculum is an important and achievable goal necessary for the overall development of students in information technology or management information systems degree programs. While traditional IT/MIS programs rely heavily on technology-based courses, it is argued that these technology courses also must promote effective writing habits needed for career growth in the IT/MIS fields. By providing examples of writing assignments currently used in several programs, this chapter illustrates for all educators in an IT or MIS program how writing assignments can be used in most MIS/IT classes. Research papers, journaling, written exams, and micro-themed papers are some of the current

methods used to incorporate writing into the IT/MIS curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The intended outcomes of traditional information technology (IT) and management information systems (MIS) programs in higher education are multi-faceted. IT/MIS students are expected to excel in mastering topics such as hardware, software, communication technologies, programming languages, and database management. However, the IT/MIS curriculum often is focused so intently on technology that students may fulfill degree requirements without fully learning other skills essential to successful career development. In an era of extremely competitive job markets and high unemployment rates, IT/MIS students need to graduate with skills that will provide for suc-

cess in whatever paths their careers may take. In order to accomplish this task, educators should strive to help develop IT/MIS students from a liberal education standpoint.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that integrating writing into the IT/MIS curriculum is an important and achievable goal for the further development of our students and, more specifically, to illustrate how writing can be incorporated into IT/MIS courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. While much of the following discussion may be culturally specific to Western societies and principally to the United States (Fox, 1994), educators in any country who are interested in developing well-rounded graduates may benefit from this chapter.

IMPORTANCE OF WRITING

Countless educators lament that many (or most) students cannot express themselves well (Bean, 2001; Epstein, 1999; Plutsky & Wilson, 2001), and this phenomenon threatens a nation's ability to develop citizens who can fully participate in political and economic processes. Moreover, when one cannot write well, it is often a symptom of a failure to think critically, which can be more damaging than just a lack of communication skills, especially for IT workers. The decline in the communication skills of college students is perhaps the best argument for including writing requirements in courses that traditionally do not have a writing component, such as those found in IT/MIS curricula. In a 2003 survey, employers in the U.S. reported that many college students graduate without the communication and writing skills necessary to succeed in the workplace (Malveaux, 2003). This problem is not specific to the U.S., however, as employers in the UK are also reporting a shortage of fundamental skills in job seekers who are recent graduates, specifically in the areas of communication and problem-solving abilities (Parrish, 1998).

As many U.S. degree programs require only one or two composition courses, it is assumed that the skills learned in these courses are not sufficient to provide students with appropriate speaking and writing skills. Some institutions still count solely on language (e.g., English) or communications courses as the only sources for developing effective writing and speaking skills, part of a discipline-by-discipline approach in which courses rarely cover concepts outside of a specific discipline. Many institutions, however, are breaking this discipline-by-discipline tradition by incorporating programs known in the U.S. as "writing-across-the-curriculum" and in Canada and Great Britain as "language-across-the curriculum." Writing-across-the-curriculum calls for the inclusion of writing requirements in courses throughout a student's college curriculum (Bean, 2001). Carnes, Jennings, Vice, and Wiedmaier (2001) further explain that a writing-across-the-curriculum program "enables faculty of non-communication disciplines to build on the writing skills taught in communication courses, provides students with the opportunity to strengthen and reinforce communication skills and encourages consistency in communication training and assessment" (p. 1). Moreover, this movement argues that the development of writing competence is a shared responsibility between the various disciplines and the language departments within a college or university (Tynjala, Mason & Lonka, 2001; Weimer, 2001). We believe that those responsible for educating tomorrow's information resources managers should share in the development of these future leaders' writing and critical thinking abilities by incorporating writing requirements throughout MIS/IT curriculums. This argument is supported by Nelson (1992), who contends that the development of key learning skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, is imperative in order for technical workers to keep up with rapid technological innovations.

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