



Contents and Approaches to Technology in Digital Writing Instruction: Evidence from Universities of Two Canadian Provinces

Marie-Josée Goulet*, Laurence Pelletier

Department of Language Studies, Université du Québec en Outaouais, Canada

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is first to describe the main trends in digital writing (DW) instruction in Ontario and Quebec universities, and second, to study differences regarding the types of contents, or regarding the approaches to technology, according to the province, to the grade, or to the discipline. A corpus of 119 digital writing courses was created and statistical analyses were carried out. Our findings suggest that mixt courses (comprising both theory and practice) and courses with an instrumental approach to technology dominate in Ontario and Quebec universities. With regards to province, grade and discipline, we found three significant relations: 1) Ontario universities are more likely to offer mixt contents than Quebec universities ($p = 0.016$); 2) communications programs have the highest proportion of mixt contents, and journalism programs have the lowest ($p = 0.049$); 3) graduate programs are more balanced than undergraduate programs ($p = 0.012$), but the instrumental approach to technology is still over-represented. In addition to providing insightful information about DW instruction in Canadian universities, our research has the merit to tell us that DW instruction can be influenced by many factors.

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1. Introduction

Although the emergence of digital technologies is fairly recent in the history of writing (Gabrial, 2008), they have already greatly transformed ways of writing and ways of perceiving writing (Bowie & McGovern, 2013; Cellier, Terrier, & Alamargot, 2007; Crozat, Bachimont, Cailleau, Bouchardon, & Gaillard, 2011; Goulet, 2012; Herrington & Moran, 2009; McKee & DeVoss, 2007; Porter, 2007; Takayoshi & Huot, 2003; Takayoshi & Sullivan, 2007; Tardy & Jeanneret, 2007). From the amalgamation of writing and technology derived a “new kind of writing space” (Porter, 2007, p. xviii), which demands new competencies. In professional settings for example, it is expected of technical writing graduates that they master common technologies (Clerc & Beaudet, 2002), as well as emerging ones (Kastman Breuch, 2002).

The wide range of competencies that ensued from the massive use of writing technologies is generally referred to as *technological literacy* (Kastman Breuch, 2002; Scott, 2006), that is, the capacity to read, write, and communicate

* Corresponding author at: Department of Language Studies, 283 Alexandre-Taché blvd, Gatineau, QC J8X 3X7, Canada. Tel.: +1 819 595 3900x4491.

E-mail addresses: marie-josee.goulet@uqo.ca (M.-J. Goulet), laurencepelletier01@gmail.com (L. Pelletier).

with technology. For professional writers and other knowledge workers, technological literacy comprises three types of skills: functional, critical, and rhetorical (DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010; Selber, 2004). Undoubtedly, universities have an important role to play in developing the technological literacy of future professional writers (Rinck & Sitri, 2012).

This paper is about digital writing (DW) instruction in Canadian universities.¹ Most research on DW instruction has focused on contextualized case studies (Kastman Breuch, 2002). Among the few more wide-scope studies, Anthony T. Atkins (2006) reported on a national survey in the United States on writing instructors' opinions and attitudes toward technology and training. One of the main findings of his study is that "very little attention is paid to the theoretical aspects of using computers to teach writing" (Atkins, 2006, section "Nature of Training"). As a matter of fact, there was no mention of theoretical considerations as part of the workshops or courses in the responses to his survey.

Others have stressed the many challenges associated with the use of technologies in writing classes. Richard J. Selfe (2005), for example, argued that writing instructors must frequently update their knowledge because of the ever-changing nature of technology. Selfe (2005) also brought to light that, paradoxically, more and more universities are interested in using technologies in writing classes, but fail at developing sustainable practices. Moreover, Pamela Takayoshi and Brian Huot (2003) underlined the fact that technologies have profoundly changed writing instruction, but that writing theories have not yet been updated. We can add to these epistemological challenges the limited budget normally granted to instructors to buy software, tools, or training, not to mention computers.

However, as it is often the case with emerging research subjects, we lack a general model to guide instructors and administrators in the implementation and use of technologies in writing classes (Kastman Breuch, 2002). In the absence of specific guidelines regarding technological literacy, how is one supposed to teach DW? We tackled the problem by studying university courses in writing and writing-related curriculums. More precisely, this study adopts a quantitative perspective and is based on statistical evidence. In their meta-analysis, Jennifer L. Bowie and Heather A. McGovern (2013) assessed the types of studies published from 2003 to 2008 in four journals, including *Computers and Composition*, and one of their conclusions is that there is relatively little empirical studies in this field. Unfortunately, no metastudy of this kind has yet been published for 2008 to 2016, but our systematic review of scholarship confirms that no research has been conducted on (Canadian) DW instruction with a quantitative empirical approach.

The absence of a model is compounded by the fact that *digital writing* is a polysemous term, which encompasses a vast array of constructs related to the tools used to produce text, and the types of media available to publish text. Also, we have to consider that DW is not the exclusive of writing programs, but is rather used and taught in many disciplines. Furthermore, two facts suggest that DW instruction in Canada (where we teach) may have cultural overtones. First, "[t]he history of writing instruction in Canadian universities differs markedly from the US experience" (Graves & Graves, 2012, p. 117). In Quebec more particularly, there is no tradition of teaching academic writing at the university level as it is the case for English in Canada, and the teaching of writing in French is provided by the arts and communication departments (Beaudet, Graves, & Labasse, 2012, p. 111). Second, in Canada there are two different traditions underlying writing research. As depicted in Céline Beaudet, Roger Graves, and Bertrand Labasse (2012), research in Quebec – a mainly French-speaking province of Canada – focuses on textual grammar, language sciences and discourse analysis, and in the rest of Canada, a psycho-cognitive approach to text production prevails. Given these considerations, we wished to investigate whether DW instruction could be different according to the province.

Inspired by this complex dilemma, we stated two research objectives. First, we want to describe the main trends in DW instruction in universities of two Canadian provinces, Quebec and Ontario. Second, we are looking to know if we can observe differences in the types of contents, or in the approaches to technology, according to the province, the grade, or the discipline.

This paper adopts a rather traditional structure. In the next section, we present the conceptual framework, which is divided into two parts: one part on DW, and another on DW instruction. The methods will follow in section 3. Then we expose the results and engage in a discussion. In the conclusion, we come back on the most important points, discuss the implications of our study, and offer ideas for future research.

¹ We use the abbreviation "DW" to refer to digital writing.

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