

Computerized Writing Assessment Technology: Business Law Students Weigh in on its Use in the College Classroom for Developing Workplace-ready Writing

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Abstract

Given the documented concerns of employers about writing competency among workers, it is desirable for instructors across disciplines, and particularly in business schools, to prioritize the development of student writing so that it is workplace-ready. This article reviews the literature on 1) undergraduate business student writing and its preparedness for the workplace, and 2) computerized technology available for assessing and providing feedback on student writing in the college classroom. It reports on a study that examines student use of the computerized writing assessment technology CriterionTM, produced by the Educational Testing Service, for writing assignments in an undergraduate business law class. It presents the results of a survey of student perceptions about the usefulness of computerized writing assessment technology as an instructional aid in writing development. Student feedback was positive with over 95% of students finding the tool to be very useful or helpful, thereby indicating that computerized writing assessment technology has the potential to become a valuable instructional tool across the curriculum. Composition instructors knowledgeable about the use of such technology are poised to play a critical role in disseminating knowledge about such tools to colleagues in other disciplines, including business schools, in which composition is practiced.

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Because one's ability to communicate in writing is so critical in business, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business ([Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2013](http://www.aacsb.edu)) ("AACSB"), the organization that accredits business schools, recognizes its importance in the standards to which its members must adhere. The greater business community, the future employers of college business students, shares this concern. If student writing is not up to par upon graduation, employers must take on the task of writing remediation. Companies spend as much as \$3.1 billion each year in an effort to improve worker-writing skills. ([Graham, 2013](#)) The relevant literature on business student writing highlights the importance of the issue of writing competency. It questions whether colleges and universities are doing enough to cultivate writing skills, what other resources they might deploy to cultivate workplace-ready writing and whether technology itself might prove to be an essential part of the solution.

This study examines one approach to developing student writing, i.e., the use of computer writing assessment technology repurposed as an instructional tool. This study extends and builds on the computer writing assessment

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literature by evaluating its use (1) as a supplemental instructional writing tool for students whose first language is English, (2) in the context of an undergraduate business school class and 3) by employing a quantitative research method that scholars remark has not been prevalent in the computers and composition field. (Bowie & McGovern, 2013).

A variety of computer writing assessment tools are available in the marketplace, including, but not limited to, Vantage Learning's "My Access," which incorporates "Intellimetric™," a writing technology portfolio; Pearson Knowledge Technologies' writing assessment tool "*Intelligent Essay Assessor™*," and EMO Solution's "Writer's Workbench" one of the first tools of this kind (Macdonald, Frase, Gringrich, & Keenan, 1982) and still in use today. This research examines the use of Criterion™ a web-based computer writing assessment program produced by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Criterion grades and evaluates essays, prompting students with suggestions for writing improvement with each submitted draft. It provides students with feedback on organization, style, word usage, mechanics and grammar. It also includes prewriting-diagramming tools to help students develop a writing plan.

The literature review that follows confirms there is little research concerning the use of Criterion, in particular, and computerized writing assessment technology, more broadly, as a college classroom instructional tool. The popular press, however, has taken note of the potential power of this technology as an instructional tool (Markkoff, 2013). Moreover, the scholarship that does exist raises many questions regarding the technology's effectiveness, appropriateness and how it might best be used both for writing assessment and development. (Herrington & Stanley (2008)).

I begin with a review of the literature on business student writing, followed by that of computer writing assessment technology. Next, I identify pertinent research questions suggested by the literature. I then introduce the features of the writing assessment technology utilized, as well as describe the participants and context for this study. After reporting the study results, I discuss the implications and identify questions for future research.

1. Writing Development: An Aspiration of Both the Academy and Business

The research of Sigmar and Hynes (2011) recognizes that business student writing needs attention. Assessing business student writing across disciplines, they examined format, content, grammar and mechanics. Their study found that, while the form and content of student writing samples largely met expectations, grammar and mechanics did not. Grammar and mechanics were weakest for students across all business disciplines, with at least thirty-three percent (33%) of every major falling below expectations in this aspect of writing. The findings of Sigmar and Hynes are consistent with the broader composition literature, which acknowledges that sentence level writing instruction can be challenging, and sentence level deficiencies particularly difficult to remediate in the less-skilled writer because the mistakes can be so unique to the individual writer (Saddler & Assaro-Saddler, 2010).

Furthermore, Sigmar and Hynes find that expanding writing skills training throughout the business school curriculum both improves students' perceptions of the importance of writing and their willingness to devote time and attention to mastering it. These findings acknowledge the wisdom of, and honor the writing across the curriculum movement which emerged in the 1980s (Maimon, 1981) and gained in popularity throughout the 1990s. (Soven, 1996)(McLeod & Soven, 2006). Sigmar and Hynes suggest that business educators seek out cross-disciplinary collaborations and the use of rubrics as useful tools in the work of remediating business student writing. Other scholars have observed that Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in Discipline initiatives which "emphasize the importance of repeated contextualized experiences for the development of writing skills" (at p. 305) meet with success. (Johnstone, Hollis, & Terry, 2002) In a study of business students, Johnstone, Hollis and Terry compared the writing development of those who practiced writing in discipline with those who did not. The results obtained supported their hypothesis that superior writing skills would correlate with repeated practice. Furthermore, when controlling for practice, writing skill development correlated with writing related to the professionally relevant area of interest to the student. This research suggests it is important that business students practice writing and that much of the practice take place beyond the general composition classes required for many business students. It substantiates K.A. Ericsson's more general research on skill development which finds that it can take as much as a decade of deliberate practice to become an expert in a given skill domain. (Kellogg & Raulerson III, 2007) According to Kellogg & Raulerson, this is true of composition which requires space, time and relevant timely feedback. Computerized writing assessment technology, the subject of this study, has the capacity to provide such feedback all along the writing process continuum, in virtually any space and time, which is why it is important to study its use. (Kellogg & Raulerson III, 2007)

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