Progress in a social work writing course: Self-efficacy, course objectives, and skills

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Abstract

Although instructors express concerns about social work students' writing skills, little research has been conducted. One remedy is a social work-focused writing course. This study assessed a required writing course with a sample of 49 baccalaureate students. From online pre- and post-test surveys, two student outcomes improved significantly: self-reported scores for writing self-efficacy and competence in course objectives. On-demand writing samples improved significantly based on anonymous rating by the course instructors; however, blind ratings found gains but not at a significant level. Improved outcomes were not associated with demographic or background characteristics. We discuss limitations of the study and implications for social work education.

Keywords: Social Work education, Writing skills, Self-efficacy, Writing interventions, Academic writing, Reflective writing

Student Progress in a Social Work Writing Course: Self-Efficacy, Course Objectives, and Skills

For nearly two decades, social work educators have expressed concerns about their students' writing skills (Rompff, 1995; Waller, 2000; Waller, Carroll, & Roemer, 1996). The importance of this issue has recently increased with the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) that link writing to Competency 3: Critical Thinking. The relevant practice behavior is: "Demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and colleagues" (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008). Although the literature has continued to document poor writing among both baccalaureate and graduate social work students (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006; Falk & Ross, 2001), few reports have dealt with methods for improving student writing. Instead, much of the literature consists of conceptual discussions of the importance of writing in the curriculum and various types of social work writing (topics reviewed briefly below). Most notable, however, is the lack of research that assesses student writing, describes writing interventions, and evaluates these for effectiveness for improving students' writing (topics reviewed in detail below). The present study aimed to fill this gap by delineating and evaluating a specific intervention, a required social work writing course in a baccalaureate program.

Conceptual Issues and Student Writing

Conceptual issues center on the importance of various types of student writing and the standards for evaluating the different types of assignments. One perspective argues for the value of reflective writing and flexible writing/grading standards, e.g., the conventions and mechanics of writing should not be a primary emphasis. Reflective writing aims to enable students to integrate personal opinions with academic material. Consequently, reflective writing typically is less formal, uses a more conversational tone, and conveys the personal voice of the writer toward

the material (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Rai, 2006; Stevens & Cooper, 2009).   Reflective writing

assignments may be structured through guided prompts or questions, with the product to be

submitted to the instructor, or it may be an unstructured journal that may or may not be kept

private. In contrast, academic writing assignments, such as analytical essays and research

papers, require a formal, less personal tone, cite authorities, and are usually not written in first

person. In grading academic writing, professors often closely scrutinize and evaluate content,

critical analysis, and writing mechanics (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006; Rai, 2004, 2006).

Professional writing assignments may also be required in the classroom, but students typically

engage in this type of writing in the field placement or workplace. Professional writing can be

powerful since it documents a relationship between the social worker, the client, and resources.

It is typically descriptive in nature—of clients, environments, and treatment plans—with the

language and standards often being very specific to the social work setting (Alter & Adkins,

2001, 2006; Roose et al., 2009). All of these forms of writing, however, require students to

master writing skills beyond the basics (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006).

     Debate has emerged regarding the different types of writing in the curriculum and the

profession. Some apparently favor reflective writing assignments and note that the profession's

predominant form of writing is documentation within private practice and organizations (Alter &

Adkins, 2001; Rai, 2004, 2006). Other opinions support this view: that formal writing could

hinder students' personal processing in reflective and professional social work writing, that most

social workers value the reflective and personal aspects of the profession and are aligned with

the profession's helping rather than research focus, and that emphasis on writing skills

disadvantages racial/ethnic/socioeconomic minorities and international, and non-traditional

students (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006; Rai, 2004; Stephens & Cooper, 2009). A different

viewpoint, however, contends that social work students need more formal training in all types of

writing since their written communications could reflect on the credibility of the profession. Moreover, many students themselves report the desire to expand their writing skills to various areas of social work practice and in the wider community (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2002; Rai, 2004; Staudt, Dulmus, & Bennett, 2003). Finally, Roose and colleagues (2009) concluded from a study of social workers' professional case documentations that good writing skills are important in client recordings and that the writing needs to be articulate, direct, precise, and should appropriately integrate tone, reflection, and data.

Assessment of Student Writing and Writing Interventions

Very few studies encompass both assessment of student writing and description and evaluation of writing interventions. One of the earliest efforts in empirical assessment of academic writing (Alter & Adkins, 2001) required a spontaneous writing sample from 124 new MSW students attending orientation. Based on the sum of scores from two raters who examined six formal writing criteria, the results showed the writing of over one-third of the students to be inadequate (equivalent to a grade of C or D). All students were offered writing assistance through a departmental writing lab; however, only 29% of students used the lab, with low use by students who had poor writing samples. Five years later, Alter and Adkins (2006) replicated their study but gave students two weeks of lead time to process the case study before implementing the semi-spontaneous writing prompt. The results, when two raters used an expanded rubric for scoring the six criteria, showed that nearly one-fourth of students produced inadequate writing samples. Although students could obtain their writing sample and scores, which could include an invitation to come to the writing lab, only 11 of 30 who failed the assessment picked up these materials. It appears the departmental writing lab as set up did not impact the students needing to improve their writing.

Writing interventions refer to means or methods for assisting students to improve their writing skills for use in academic and professional settings. Writing interventions range from those in which the focus is on what others can do to help students with their writing to interventions that describe a direct and structured course experience in which students actively participate to improve their writing. An example of the first type is Alter and Adkins' (2001, 2006) description of a departmental-sponsored writing lab staffed by a retired English professor. Other interventions have directly focused on preparing social work instructors and field supervisors to actively help students across the curriculum to improve their writing (Dolejs & Grant, 2000; Kahn & Holody, 2012). For example, in this category, Moor, Jensen-Hart, and Hooper (2012) described an extensive training process provided to faculty by a writing consultant with the goal of raising awareness of and competence to promote students' writing ability. The second type of writing intervention uses formal social work courses to varying degrees whereby students experience direct, structured, and focused writing assistance. Below we summarize studies of writing interventions that involve formal social work courses; this literature is most relevant to our present study of a social work course devoted exclusively to various types of social work writing.

Minimal classroom time was involved in Anderson's (2003) web-based writing module for students to use independently as a means to improve their writing of professional reports. The module contained examples of professional reports, two practice or "mock" family assessment assignments, and links to such writing resources as grammar. One class had no access to the module, a second class was encouraged to use it, and a third class was required to complete the module and mock assessments before completing the family assessment required for the course. The results suggested improvement for the last two groups, but the evaluation

was quite subjective since the author/developer graded the family assessments, and no statistical analysis was conducted.

Badger (2010) reported on an undergraduate social work capstone course that included several types of writing assistance. Peers were trained to give each other feedback on their writing. In addition, writing center student staff and the instructor gave feedback, and students could also attend workshops presented by the writing center. At the end of the course, most students reported positive outcomes with course content and writing skills when they participated with peers serving as reviewers and mentors. Concerns from this study included the amount of time the peer mentoring took in class, the lack of experience students had in giving feedback, and the way students viewed the peer mentoring time. Although the research design did not allow for conclusions, the use of peer review and peer teaching, with clear structure and training, may be a promising pedagogy to assist students in improving writing skills and integrating professional knowledge.

Horton and Diaz (2011) described a course-based intervention for baccalaureate students' academic writing but provided no evaluation of its effectiveness. The authors developed an introductory social work course that met the university's Writing Across the Curriculum writing requirement and was a social work requirement for entry to practice courses and internship. The writing components in the course included part of each class session dealing with writing skills and revisions, face-to-face consultation on revisions with the instructor, online writing resources, two highly-structured writing assignments, peer review for drafts, and an extensive grading rubric provided to students, including instruction in how to use it in writing their papers. The authors provided no outcome data, but noted anecdotal impressions of students' excitement and positive faculty comments, and stated that they are in the process of evaluating students' perceptions of the project.

An ambitious empirical study evaluating an intervention targeting baccalaureate students' academic writing was conducted by Vourlekis and Hall (2007). The design involved three generalist practice courses, with two being designated writing-intensive courses, consistent with the strategy of "writing in the discipline" as a means to improve undergraduate students' writing. Grant funds supported the training of faculty to teach writing-intensive courses and rate assignments. The two writing-intensive courses covered social work practice content, but also integrated writing as a process of critical thinking. The specific writing components included small group discussion of targeted assignments (pre-writing/thinking) and peer critique/feedback (rethinking, revising, rewriting). Using six criteria and a five-point rating scale, raters scored unidentified matched pre- and post- examples of two designated course-assigned papers for the final sample of 61. The conclusion was that the intervention contributed to "improvement in student writing in three of four essential professional criteria" and in overall writing skills.

The above summary of studies suggests the importance of evaluating writing interventions. The literature has not addressed the intervention of a specific "social work writing course" of the kind that we report on here. Our course, however, contains some of the writing principles, components, and teaching methods described in the literature.

Self-Efficacy and Social Work Learning

The concept of self-efficacy is important to the present study and is defined as the individual's judgment/belief about how capable he or she is to perform the tasks necessary to a given situation (Bandura, 1989, 1993). Self-efficacy has been positively linked to academic outcomes (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991) and career-related performance; for example, studies of counselor self-efficacy in the context of basic, advanced, and specialized counseling skills, have included "undergraduate recreation students, counseling trainees at every level, masters'

level counselors and psychologists, and related professions, (e.g., clergy and medical students)" (Larson & Daniels, 1998, p. 180).

The use of self-efficacy as a measure of social work program outcomes has expanded greatly in the past few years. The view is that the construct of self-efficacy may be an effective strategy that could meet part of the assessment requirement specified in the new Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2008). For example, recent studies have reported strong psychometric properties for self-efficacy scales for social work research (Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, & Rosenberg, 1999; Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, & Onghena, 2007), foundation practice (Holden, Anastas, & Meenaghan, 2003, 2005), evaluation (Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, & Onghena, 2008), field placement (Fortune, Cavazos, & Lee, 2005), and the program-specific objectives of an MSW Advanced program (Rishel, & Majewski, 2009). Although the concept of self-efficacy has been applied to writing ability in general (Pajares, 2003; Pajares & Valiante, 2005), self-efficacy has not been studied specifically with social work students' writing skills.

Method

We evaluated a structured comprehensive writing intervention that students would actively experience, that is, a required three-credit hour course, Social Work 3890: Writing for Social Work. This course is part of the baccalaureate professional program, and it meets the university's general education requirement for a third English writing/composition course, which can be a "writing in the discipline" course. Innovations in the study included a pre-post research design, online administration of the surveys, measurement of both self-efficacy and competence in course objectives and balancing these self-report measures with an objective indicator of skills, that is, a student writing sample completed "on demand" (Alter & Adkins, 2006). The prompts for the paragraph samples dealt with several choices around social work content that students had recently studied and required the organization, paragraph and sentence

structure, and correct grammar, spelling, etc. expected for all types of social work writing

products. The writing samples were completed within the survey and were not part of student

grades for the course. Finally, a detailed scoring rubric was developed to rate the writing

samples, and inter-rater reliability was examined.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate students' progress in the course based on their

perceptions of self-efficacy in writing and competence in course objectives and on an impromptu

writing sample rated by the course instructors and a second rating team. The study employed a

one-group, matched pre-test post-test design and posited three primary hypotheses. From pre- to

post-test measurement, (1) students' self-efficacy for writing will increase; (2) students'

competence in course objectives will improve; and (3) students' writing samples will improve.

The design reflects the reality that the study of a required course does not readily accommodate

random assignment or a control group. All students were required to take the writing course

during the junior year in the one semester when it was offered. The study was approved by the

University's IRB (# 586-09-EX).

Participants

Participants were students in the baccalaureate social work program who enrolled for the

Writing for Social Work (3 credit hours), in the Spring 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters. For the

Spring 2010 course, the entire class of 26 completed both pre- and post-surveys; four

submissions were eliminated due to lack of matching unique ID number. For the Spring 2011

course, 28 of 29 students completed both surveys; one submission was eliminated due to lack of

matching ID number.

The total sample size was 49. Analysis of the demographic/background characteristics by

course year found only one difference: 2010 students were more likely to be employed in social

work/human services jobs, $X^2 = 7.23$ (49, 1), $p = .010$. Since there were no other differences

between the two groups, all further analyses were conducted on the total sample of 49. The

group included 42 females (86%) and 7 males (14%); the mean age was 23.8 years, ranging from

20 to 47 years (SD = 5.9). Race/ethnicity numbers were 37 White, 5 Hispanic, 4 African-

American and 3 Other. Regarding employment, 14% were unemployed, 59% had part-time, and

27% had full-time employment, with 46% having jobs in social work or human services. For

meeting the university's general education requirement of two college composition courses

completed prior to the social work writing course, 86% had to take both composition courses,

while only 14% waived out of one or both courses; the time since completing the most recent

college writing course was two years or more (45%) and from six months up to two years (55%).

The Intervention

The course has been a requirement in the baccalaureate program in a metropolitan

Midwest university for 12 years. The official syllabus was revised in the past three years in

accord with the EPAS guidelines for mapping competencies and practice behaviors. The catalog

description states:

> This course emphasizes the process of critical thinking and analysis and the process of
>
> effective professional writing as required for generalist social work practice. Students
>
> will apply selected generalist social work concepts to prepare writing samples such as
>
> research/term papers, client progress/psychosocial reports, analytical reviews,
>
> professional development papers, business communications, and grant proposals.
>
> Research and writing skills emphasized are: conducting electronic literature searches,
>
> outlining, paragraph and sentence structure, revising, using APA format, and proofreading
>
> for correct grammar, word usage, and punctuation.

The specific content of this course is also reflected in the course objectives, which are described

below in the Measures section and listed in Table 2.

General course requirements included attendance and active student participation in classroom discussion and small group activities, e.g., student presentations, writing, discussion, feedback, editing, proofreading, self-reflection, and evaluation of group process. Student grades were based on a variety of assignments, including group participation, tests and quizzes, and specific writing assignments. The course met for 2 hours and 45 minutes each week over an academic semester of 16 weeks. Teaching methods consisted of a combination of lecture, class and small-group discussions, guest speakers, and hands-on, in-class exercises. The following textbooks were used: for the 2010 section, Glicken, M. D. (2008). *A guide to writing for human service professionals.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; and, for the 2011 section, Healy, K. (2007). *Writing skills for social workers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Although there were no fidelity measures, both faculty instructors were committed to adhering to the course syllabus that identified the types of writing to cover. Since they both had worked on the task of linking course objectives and assignments to EPAS competencies and practice behaviors, they were mindful to cover the required content, which included academic, professional, and business writing. Consequently, with minor variation, both instructors required the following:

1. At least one major academic writing assignment. This assignment entailed a literature review or a brief analytical paper, with emphasis on developing an outline and thesis statement, analysis, and accurate use of sources.

2. Professional writing assignments. These included a clinical recording (e.g., of interview material) and an administrative product (e.g., a brief grant proposal).

3. Business writing assignments. These included a student resume and an application cover letter or reference letter for a hypothetical position.

4.   Lab assignments. Small groups worked on writing assignments, reviewed and discussed

basic writing and grammatical principles required for all types of writing, and reviewed

and offered feedback on each other's drafts of writing assignments.

Through extensive feedback on written assignments, instructors aimed to improve students'

overall writing as well as their critical thinking skills.

Procedure

For two consecutive academic years, students enrolled in the course were invited to

participate in the research study. The courses had different instructors, but they each followed

the official course syllabus. One week before the semester began, the instructor sent students on

the class list an email invitation, with an attached consent form, explaining that, if they

consented, they would complete the anonymous online survey at the beginning of the first class

session on classroom computers and a follow-up survey on the last day of class. The email

explained that participation was voluntary and would have no bearing on their status in or grade

for the course. Extra credit was offered as an incentive only to students who completed both the

pre- and post-survey. To maintain anonymity but also permit matching of pre- and post-surveys,

participants received guidance at the first administration on how to create a unique identification

(ID) number and retrieve it for use on the post-test survey. An email was sent one week before

the final class session to remind students to retrieve their unique IDs for the post-test survey.

Measures

The survey was designed for anonymous online administration through the Zoomerang

website. A paper copy was reviewed for clarity by a senior social work student who had

completed the writing course the previous year. The pre-test survey consisted of five parts

presented in the following order: demographic/background information, self-efficacy for writing

skills, self-rating on competencies listed in the course objectives, perception of how their most

demanding English composition teacher would rate their writing skills, and a one-paragraph

writing sample. Except for omitting the demographic/background items, the post-test survey

consisted of the same items and format as the pre-test survey, but different prompts were given

for the two writing samples. The pre-test survey demographic/background questions included

age, gender, employment status and type, race/ethnicity, and three questions about how students

met the university's general education requirement in college composition.

Self-efficacy for writing. Participants were asked to rate their confidence to perform

11 writing tasks "right now at this point in time," using any number between 0 (*I am completely*

*sure I **cannot** do it*) to 100 (I *am completely sure that I **can** do it*). Examples of tasks were "I

can: use details to support my idea" and "I can: write well-constructed sentences in an essay."

Table 1 lists the writing tasks; the total score on Self-Efficacy for Writing was obtained by

computing the average of each student's mean rating for the 11 items. Reliability analysis found

Cronbach's alpha = .97 ($N = 46$); this indicates high internal consistency of the items.

Competence in course objectives. The competencies stated in the objectives in the

course syllabus were surveyed with directions asking: how well can you demonstrate the

behaviors stated in each course objective? Since several objectives contained from two to five

discrete behaviors, a total of 20 behaviors were measured. Specifically, directions asked

participants to give a rating between 1 (*Not at all*) to 10 (*Extensively*) for each behavior by

imagining having to write "a paragraph about or explain/demonstrate each competency right

now" to their professor. Examples of competencies included were: describe the general

characteristics of professional communication and the standards for various written products;

demonstrate competence in writing effective professional business communications, demonstrate

competency in several writing skills, explain standards for client recordings, and describe an

effective grant proposal. Table 2 lists the course objectives. When multiple behaviors comprised

an objective, a score was obtained for the objective by computing the mean for the ratings of the behaviors included; thus each objective would have a score from 1 to 10; the total score on Competence in Course Objectives was obtained by computing the mean rating for all objectives.

Most demanding composition teacher's ratings. For the same 11 writing tasks listed for Self-Efficacy and using the same 0 to 100 rating scale, participants gave their perception of how their most demanding composition teacher would rate them. Directions asked them to recall the grade and feedback they received from this teacher near the end of that course. This question was designed to provide a score that referenced a teacher's evaluation that could be compared to the student's score on Self-Efficacy for Writing.

Paragraph writing sample. The paragraph writing sample obtained at pre- and post-survey was designed to be an objective measure of writing competency. The rationale was that the sample would assess the skills in course objective # 5 that are applicable to all types of writing: "Demonstrate competency in various writing products in the development of organization, thesis statements, paragraph, and sentence structure and in correct usage of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and APA format." Specifically, the pre- and post-prompts encompassed social work content that students had recently studied and asked them to explain their view of the importance of a selected piece of that content. The familiar content and giving a choice for their focus would enable them to demonstrate competency in paragraph organization, topic sentence and support, sentence structure, and correct usage of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The directions called for one well-developed paragraph anonymously submitted with the online survey; students had no prior knowledge of the paragraph topics. This latter standard differs from prompts used in other studies in which graduate students had prior knowledge and preparation time for writing samples (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006).

The pre-test and post-test survey prompts for the paragraph content were different. The rationale for different prompts was that the topics involved some degree of recall of the most recent social work content studied. Thus the pre-test topic choices referred to material covered in the human behavior course just completed, while the post-test topic choices referred to social work content studied during the current semester just ending. The writing sample, to be rated by faculty, was seen as an objective outcome to balance the other two outcomes that were student perceptions of their self-efficacy and competence.

Students had approximately 15 minutes to write the paragraph; directions advised them to make the final copy an example of their best writing. For the pre-test survey, the topic referred to adolescent development/functioning studied the previous semester in the human behavior course. The paragraph was to discuss why/how the material studied had influenced their professional development; students could choose one of three options to focus on in the paragraph: biological aspects, psychological/emotional aspects, or social aspects of adolescent development. For the post-test survey, the paragraph topic referred to social work courses studied in the current semester; the three options were to discuss: (1) a controversial issue studied in any social work course, (2) a highly useful practice concept, or (3) a concept that presented the greatest challenge to professional development. (See Appendix A for the exact prompts for the paragraph samples.)

The rating of the paragraphs involved two teams of raters who were all full-time faculty. The first team consisted of the two course instructors for the 2010 and 2011 sections. The second team consisted of two instructors who had previously taught the writing course, but had no knowledge of the present study or its research design. They were asked to rate 94 paragraph samples written by students in the writing course; to facilitate a blind rating, the paragraphs were printed in random order without any designation of pre-test or post-test. All raters received a

copy of both the pre- and post- topic prompts that students had used for writing their paragraphs.

All raters used a scoring rubric that identified three criteria: social work content (addressing the

required content in the prompt), organization, and writing mechanics. For each criterion, a 5-

point scale described levels: 1 = *Inadequate*, 2 = *Weak*, 3 = *Adequate*, 4 = *Competent*, 5 =

Superior. For data analysis, the paragraph scores were the total of each score on the three

criteria. The total paragraph score could range from 0 to 15.

In the scoring procedure, the two course instructors knew the research design and the

topic prompts and, consequently, were aware of which were pre-paragraphs and post-paragraphs.

They used the following procedure: each instructor read and rated the paragraphs independently

at separate times, in the university library, and completed the task in one sitting: first scoring all

the pre-test survey paragraphs, taking a break, and then scoring all the post-test survey

paragraphs. Inter-rater reliability calculated through Pearson's correlation was at the moderate

level: for pre-paragraph scores, r = .63 (47), p = .000, and for the post-paragraph scores, r = .59

(47), p = .000. For the scoring procedure with the blind rating team, they received the grading

rubric and brief written directions as to what constituted major and minor errors in writing

mechanics. It was suggested that they grade in the library, do the grading in one sitting, and take

breaks as needed during the scoring process. (See Appendix B for the scoring rubric.) Inter-rater

reliability for the blind rating team was at the moderate level for the pre-paragraph scores, r = .51

(47), p =.000, and low for the post-paragraph scores, r = .19 (47), p = .198. The discussion

section below elaborates on the issue of inter-rater reliability.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, paired sample t tests were performed to measure pre- to post-test

change on scores for Self-Efficacy for Writing, Competence in Course Objectives, and the

Paragraph Writing Sample. For other analyses, Chi-square, independent samples t-tests, correlation, and Cohen's *d* for effect size were used.

Results

The primary research hypotheses predicted improvement in pre- to post-test scores on three outcome measures: Self-Efficacy for Writing, Competence in Course Objectives, and the Paragraph Writing Sample. We also examined the relationship of demographic/background characteristics with the three outcome measures.

Self-Efficacy for Writing

As hypothesized, writing self-efficacy improved significantly. This outcome was measured by participants' rating their confidence to perform tasks dealing with writing, using the scale of 0 to 100; the self-efficacy score was an average of the 11 task items (see Table 1). Table 3 shows the *t*-test result that writing self-efficacy improved significantly and that the effect size was medium. Since the sample on this measure did not meet the standard of a normal distribution, a non-parametric tests was also performed: Wilcoxon confirmed the paired *t*-test results, $Z = 4.65, p = .000$.

To examine whether students over-estimated their confidence, a preliminary paired *t*-test compared participants' writing efficacy score with their prediction of how their most demanding composition teacher would have graded them on the same tasks. No differences were found as the self-efficacy score and the predicted teacher evaluation were nearly identical. Results were: the pre-test survey, self-efficacy, $M = 84.22 (14.30)$ and teacher evaluation, $M = 84.18 (14.35)$, $t(48) = 0.016, p = 0.987$; the post-test survey, self-efficacy, $M = 89.60 (13.96)$ and teacher evaluation, $M = 89.22 (14.46)$, $t(48) = 1.14, p = 0.261$. Since both measures were students' self-reports, this finding, while useful, does not necessarily rule out inflated student scores on writing self-efficacy.

Competence in Course Objectives

As hypothesized, competence in course objectives improved significantly. Using a 10-point rating scale, participants rated their competence on eight course objectives that included 20 behaviors. Table 3 reports the results of the paired *t*-test showing the significant improvement in course objectives with a large effect size.

Paragraph Writing Sample

The results were mixed for improvement on the paragraph samples. This outcome score consisted of the average of the two instructors' scores for each paragraph and separately the average of the two blind raters' scores; the score could range from 0 to 15. The writing samples improved significantly as based on the course instructors' anonymous ratings; however, based on the two blind ratings, the scores improved but did not reach significance at the .05 level. Table 4 and Figure 1 show the results of the paired *t-test* for the pre-post paragraph scores separately analyzed for each rating team.

Demographic/Background Characteristics

Analysis of demographic/background characteristics with the outcome measures found no significant associations; that is, the improved change scores on self-efficacy and competence in course objectives were not associated with age, gender, employment status, employment in human services, race/ethnicity, and three questions about how they met the university's general education English composition requirement in college. Similarly, the background variables were not associated with the change scores on the writing sample whether calculated from ratings by the course instructors or the blind raters.

Discussion

This evaluation of student progress in a required baccalaureate course in social work writing has important implications for social work education. Although there has been some

minimal evaluation of course-based writing interventions as discussed earlier, no prior research

has evaluated a required formal writing course for social work students, that is, a "writing in the

discipline" course such as ours. Since our study documented student progress, other

baccalaureate programs might consider requiring such a course; however, the Council on Social

Work Education has no information on the number of programs that require such a course

(J. Holmes, personal communication, June 8, 2012). The participants' increased competence in

behaviors stated in course objectives and in self-efficacy is important. As discussed earlier, self-

efficacy has increasingly been used in the past decade in assessment of social work education. In

addition, self-efficacy can influence how people think, feel, act, and motivate themselves, for

example, in determining how much effort they will expend on a particular task and its obstacles.

Students who have confidence in their writing ability may have less anxiety in approaching both

academic and professional writing assignments (Pajares, 2003; Pajares & Valiante, 2005).

Moreover, as they gain objective evidence of their writing skills from academic and field writing

assignments, their self-efficacy for writing should continue to expand.

   In addition to self-reported gains, students' also improved their "on demand" writing

samples, although the results were mixed and raised issues of inter-rater reliability. The two

course instructors' anonymous ratings strongly supported the improvement; however, the

independent raters' improvement in scores did not reach the .05 level of significance. This

discrepancy between the two rating teams in paragraph change scores should not negate the

results of the instructors' ratings. It should be noted that the blind reviewers' inter-rater

reliability was lower than that of the instructors.

   Differences in scoring preparation and procedures for the two rating teams may have

contributed to systematic measurement errors. The course instructors rated the paragraphs

several months following completion of the two-year project. They followed a strict procedure

of rating the anonymous paragraphs in one sitting, with a break, at the university library, a procedure believed to promote a consistent scoring set. Since they had designed the research, however, they knew the paragraph topics and knowingly graded pre-tests first and post-tests after that; this sequencing could have introduced expectation bias in scoring. In contrast, the independent raters were recruited to rate the paragraphs over a year after the project was completed and had no knowledge of the research design. Their task was much more complex for the following reasons. Since they were grading randomly arranged paragraphs that could be on six topic choices (three options for the pre-test and three different options for the post-test), they had to keep track of all these content options while reading and rating the three criteria for each paragraph. Although they had a copy of paragraph prompts and directions for the scoring rubric, it could have been difficult to maintain a consistent scoring set when reading paragraphs on so many topics in a random format in which the paragraph topics were constantly changing. In addition, although it was suggested that they complete their rating of all 94 paragraphs in one sitting (with breaks as needed), they did not adhere to this regimen as it proved impossible given other demands on their time. In fact, they reported grading under diverse circumstances, some not necessarily conducive to maintaining a consistent scoring set.

Another issue may also have contributed to the disparity in inter-rater reliability. Even with a scoring rubric, a high degree of subjectivity is a major risk for systematic measurement error in projects using raters. Alter and Adkins (2006) have discussed the need for effective training of faculty raters that includes participation in the development of the rubric and a mutual understanding of it and of what is being measured. A lesson learned in our study is that the minimal training given the two blind raters, namely printed directions, was insufficient for the complex task. More specificity in the rubric and more focused, intensive training in the criteria

and use of the rubric, along with examples of scoring, might have reduced subjectivity and improved inter-rater reliability.

There are several limitations with the present study. Randomized assignment and use of a control group were not possible in evaluating this course since students were required to take it as a cohort in the junior year. Further, there was no long-term follow-up of the outcomes measured, such as a subsequent survey using the same measures at the end of the participants' senior year. In addition, the design could have been strengthened by asking students to write about the same general topic for both pre- and post-test in a way that could allow for student choice. A more ambitious research design might have collected a matched and coded senior level academic paper from each research participant to be scored with a rubric similar to the one used for the sample paragraphs. Some of these limitations might be overcome in evaluating the effectiveness of optional writing improvement interventions that are discussed below. For example, a long-term study of writing workshops might allow for a control group of students (those not attending the workshop). Nonetheless, it would always be difficult to control for the impact of time and new learning on students' social work writing products.

Conclusion

Given the continuing complaints about students' writing and the little empirical knowledge available about effective interventions, social work programs need to move forward to design, implement, and evaluate a variety of educational/training interventions to assist all students in their writing. Although our study evaluated a required baccalaureate social work writing course, it is reasonable to consider the writing needs of graduate students. As noted earlier, Alter and Adkins (2006) reported that one-fourth of beginning MSW students in their program lacked adequate writing skills. While it is not likely that a required writing course would fit with most MSW programs, other options should be considered. Typical interventions

for graduate students' writing include offering brief in-person workshops or online writing resources, referring students to a departmental or university sponsored writing clinic, and having faculty provide detailed feedback and follow-up on student writing assignments. The profession needs these and other types of interventions to be clearly delineated, implemented, and evaluated.

If faculty assistance as a writing intervention is to be effective in promoting students' writing ability, faculty members will need commitment to this task and structured training in how to carry it out. It is well known that professors within the same program often have widely differing expectations and grading standards for their writing assignments. Moor, Jensen-Hart, and Hooper (2012) described a five-month training process for a baccalaureate faculty with a writing consultant; a major outcome was learning how to make explicit their expectations through detailed description of writing assignments that incorporate discipline-specific tasks. Steps in this process were for faculty to discuss the issue of student writing, acknowledge the different types and purposes of required writing assignments, determine if writing skill is more critical to certain courses and certain assignments, agree on writing standards and expectations, and seek greater consistency in evaluating the writing in relation to the content component of assignments. To gain this type of shared vision, it is likely that many faculty themselves could use a refresher writing workshop; among other benefits, this might also promote greater consistency in grading students' written assignments. Given the extensive demands on faculty, finding time and energy to devote to the writing aspects of the curriculum will be a challenge and may require faculty advocates and incentives (Alter & Adkins, 2006). Small steps toward this goal are possible; for example, in our School, a faculty member has offered brief intensive writing workshops and compiled "The Top 10 APA Basics" for use by both students and faculty in academic writing assignments.

There is reason to believe that effective communication (e.g., written and oral) and the process of critical thinking are highly related. Since programs are required by the CSWE's 2008 EPAS to cover the competency of critical thinking and its practice behaviors on effective written and oral communication, programs may need to address more explicitly how their curriculum meets these standards. The broad issue of expectations and standards for student writing may need even closer attention in the future as technological practices associated with email, texting, Facebook, twitter, etc. create further challenges to effective writing and critical thinking.

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Table 1

Self-Efficacy Items

I can:

1. Write a clear focused essay.

2. Use details to support my idea.

3. Write a well-organized essay with a clear beginning, developed middle, and meaningful ending.

4. Correctly use paragraph format in an essay.

5. Write with a tone appropriate to various types of content.

6. Use correct words when writing an essay.

7. Write well-constructed sentences in an essay.

8. Use correct grammar in an essay.

9. Correctly spell all words in an essay.

10. Correctly use punctuation in an essay.

11. Write an essay that will earn a high grade.

Table 2

Course Objectives

1. Recall and use for critical analysis and writing assignments selected concepts studied in: SOWK 3010 Human Behavior and the Social Environment, SOWK 3110 Social Welfare Policy, SOWK 3320 Social Work Practice I.

2. Describe the general characteristics of professional communication and the standards for various written products.

3. Apply NASW ethical principles that apply to all types of professional written communications.

4. Demonstrate competency in basic computer usage and tools such as: word processing, electronic literature search, accessing and evaluating Internet resources.

5. Demonstrate competency in various writing products in the development of organization; thesis statement; paragraph structure; sentence structure; correct use of grammar, spelling, punctuation; correct use of APA format.

6. Explain standards for: effective professional client service recordings required in generalist practice settings and analytical summaries of work-related projects/issues.

7. Demonstrate competence in writing effective professional business communications: interoffice memoranda, business letters, resume.

8. Describe the components of an effective brief grant proposal for a social service agency program.

Table 3

Paired t-test on Self-Reported Outcome Measures

Measure	*M (SD)*	*t*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Self-Efficacy for Writing (*N* = 49)		4.83	.000	0.69
Pre-test	84.22 (14.30)			
Post-test	89.60 (13.96)			
Competence in Course Objectives (*N* = 49)		6.87	.000	1.07
Pre-test	5.97 (1.53)			
Post-test	7.60 (1.17)			

Table 4

Paired t-test on Teams' Average Ratings for Paragraph Samples (N = 47)

Rater Team	M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Two Course Instructors		7.77	.000	1.13
Pre-test	9.03 (2.55)			
Post-test	12.11 (1.91)			
Two Blind Reviewers		1.59	.119	__
Pre-test	8.33 (2.42)			
Post-test	8.95 (2.00)			

Figure 1

Average Ratings for Paragraph Samples
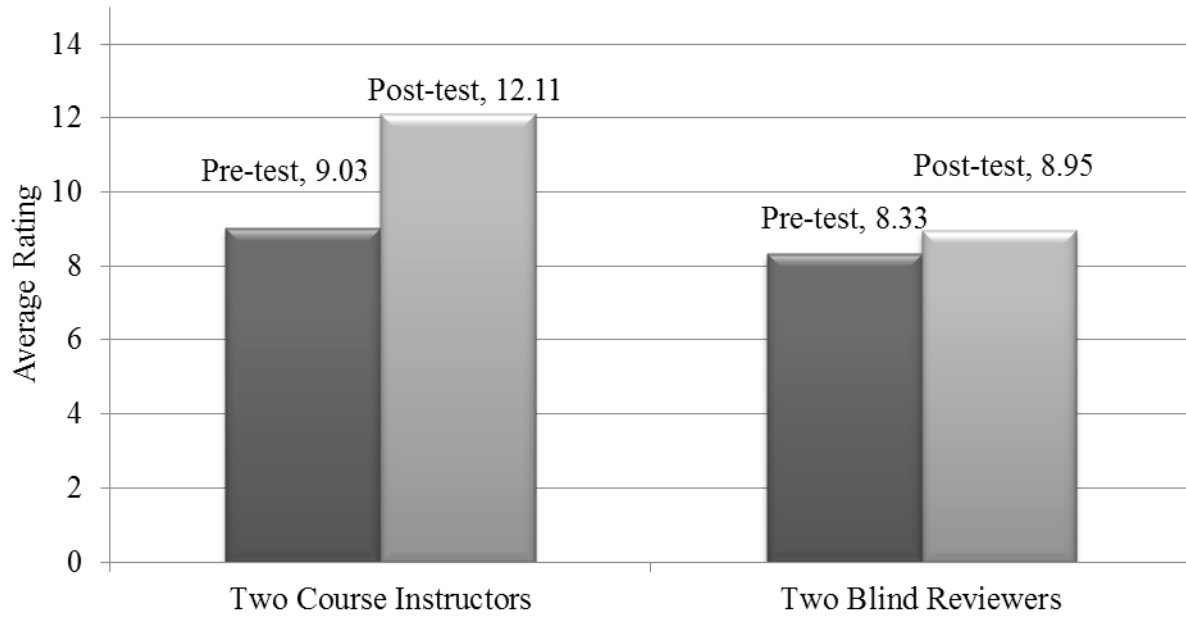
Appendix A
Prompts for Paragraphs

Pre-Survey
Write one well-developed paragraph about a concept or principle that deals with some aspect of adolescent development or functioning that you learned last semester in SOWK 3010: Human Behavior and the Social Environment I. You may choose one of the following concepts:

--biological aspects of adolescent development or functioning;
--psychological/emotional aspects of adolescent development or functioning;
--social aspects of adolescent development or functioning.

In the paragraph, discuss the chosen concept/principle/material and why/how it has influenced your professional development as a social worker.

Post-Survey
Write one well-developed paragraph. Select from one of the following topics to write about. Discuss:

--a controversial issue or concept studied this semester in any social work course;
--a practice concept studied this semester in any social work course that you think is highly useful for social work practice;
--a concept or issue studied this semester in any social work course that presented the greatest challenge to your professional development.

Appendix B
Rubric for Assessment of Pre and Post Paragraph Samples

Competency Criterion	1	2	3	4	5
Suggested/ Assigned social work content	Inadequate confused, neglects important aspects	Weak briefly mentioned but neglects aspects	Adequate explanation, understanding, little development	Competent clear explanation, thinking, understanding and application	Superior fully addresses, thoughtful explanation and integration
Organization Topic sentence at beginning or end, supporting evidence/ examples, presentation style	Inadequate not a clear topic sentence, no meaningful evidence/ examples/ support	Weak attempt at topic sentence, some support, little development	Adequate topic sentence and some good supporting material	Competent good topic sentence, organization, convincing examples/ support, adequate presentation style	Superior strong topic sentence, logical organization, detailed convincing support, engaging presentation style
Sentence structure, grammar, word usage, spelling, punctuation	Inadequate extensive pattern of major writing errors in all 5 categories	Weak some writing errors in several categories	Adequate few writing errors across several categories	Competent few minor writing errors in one or two categories	Superior sentence structure, word usage, no writing errors