

Re-thinking the writing syllabus: How contextual factors inform curriculum revision**Jonna Marie Lim**

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies demonstrate the effectiveness of needs analysis in relation to the language and communication goals of students. In this regard, different stakeholders contribute greatly to revision of curricula. While English language departments play an integral role in meeting the communication needs of learners, a more nuanced integration of stakeholders' input is crucial. In this reflection, we detail the process of revising a writing syllabus, incorporating different stakeholders' perspectives, expectations, and experiences. We argue that while needs analysis provides valuable instructional input, considering contextual factors is also essential in developing a sensible and holistic curriculum design that acknowledges ecological relationships between units in the university. Specifically, the interaction of the contextual factors, such as the course's motivation, the writing and reading expectations of the different academic departments, and the priorities and experiences of teachers and students, led to the realignment of topics, and changes in task design and assessment practices in the revised writing syllabus.

Introduction

Needs analysis is an integral part of language curriculum development. By examining what learners already know and what they need to know in designing or redesigning the curriculum or its components such as the syllabus, the goals and content of the course become relevant to the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Nation & Macalister, 2010). While the focus on learning needs and wants remains essential, Simpson (2020) offers a critical next step in advocating for educators to boldly reimagine existing practices to design transformative learning experiences that prioritise inclusivity, fairness, and responsiveness. This call resonates particularly in the domain of academic writing, where engaging with broader contextual factors, as explored by Altınmakas and Bayyurt (2018), becomes crucial for fostering student success. In the study, academic writing at the undergraduate level is influenced by interrelated educational and contextual factors such as the amount and nature of first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing instruction and experience, engagement with the academic context and discourse, and teachers' expectations. Tertiary-level students bring with them writing practices from their undergraduate experience, which is found to be insufficient for academic survival, and students need to adapt to new ways of learning how to write academic texts. Hyland (2013) further explains that practices in academia expect students to possess knowledge of academic register and rhetorical structure instead of a generalist writing skill. It is therefore necessary to consider these contextual factors when making decisions about goals and content for advanced-level academic writing courses.

Crafting an effective academic writing course for graduate students necessitates a nuanced approach. While catering to the diverse needs of students from various disciplines is crucial, involving stakeholders familiar with specific programmes, industry demands, and graduate education in general is equally important. This ensures that the curriculum aligns with both foundational writing competencies and practical expectations. Furthermore, teacher beliefs play a significant role in shaping curriculum development, especially in writing instruction. As Mante-Estacio, Valdez and Pulido (2018) point out, teachers' beliefs about learner-centeredness, instructional effectiveness, and cultural considerations directly influence their teaching strategies, ultimately impacting student writing performance. Therefore, a comprehensive curriculum development process should go beyond student needs and broader contexts to include teacher input alongside that of students and administrators, paving the way for a research-informed and effective writing programme.

The present reflective paper reports the process of revision of an academic writing course for graduate students at a university in Manila informed by incorporating perspectives, expectations, and experiences from different stakeholders, particularly writing students, their writing teachers, and programme-level administrators belonging to different academic departments of various disciplines in the university. The paper argues that while needs analysis provides valuable instructional input, contextual factors that influence writing are also essential to consider in developing a sensible, relevant, and holistic curriculum that acknowledges ecological relationships between units in the university. In this experience of a syllabus review, the paper details the process of revising a writing syllabus, by revisiting the course's motivation, the writing and reading expectations of the different academic departments, and the teachers' and students' experiences and priorities.

The Context

ENG501M is an intensive academic reading and writing course designed specifically for newly enrolled graduate students at the university who would benefit from enhancing their essay writing skills, as identified during the Graduate School admissions process. The course delves into skills that strengthen English for Academic Purposes (EAP), with a particular focus on text critiquing, responding to writing assignments, and delivering oral presentations.

Students enrolled in the course come from different programmes and colleges across the university. To accommodate the diverse academic writing requirements of these graduate students, ENG501M classes incorporate lessons and activities that cater to the unique scholarly demands of each discipline. Students are expected to familiarise themselves with a range of scholarly materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, research proposals, article critiques, and reviews of related literature. They also engage in the production of research-informed writing and presentations that align with the university's commitment to research productivity and fostering a culture of scholarly participation among its students.

The syllabus revision was initiated to establish a comprehensive and multi-stakeholder approach to evaluating the course's effectiveness in achieving its intended objectives and ensuring alignment with the expectations of the different academic programmes whose students enrol in the course. The evaluation process incorporated feedback from currently enrolled ENG501M students, from the

graduate programme coordinators responsible for sending their students to ENG501M, as well as the insights and experiences of the ENG501M instructors themselves.

Insights from the Different Academic Departments

Eight (8) graduate programme coordinators responded to a survey evaluating the effectiveness and challenges of the ENG501M course. They belong to the Departments of Chemical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Industrial and Systems Engineering, Economics, Marketing and Advertising, Decision Sciences and Innovation, and Educational Leadership and Management.

All respondents cited research articles as the most common text type involved in their respective graduate school requirements. This was followed by critiques (four responses), and reflection papers (two responses), while essays, case analyses, and outlines had one response each. In terms of written resources their students use, most students used research articles followed by specialised reference books (e.g., handbooks, compendiums), full theses and dissertations, and then textbooks. A few others reported magazines, reference books, and news articles. Meanwhile, most coordinators reported that the American Psychological Association (APA) (7th edition) is the default documentation formatting used in their programmes, while one said they use the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) system.

In terms of writing concerns, seven out of eight respondents mentioned organisation and synthesis as the most problematic area for their graduate students. This is followed by grammar and mechanics, citation, paraphrasing and summarising, and lastly, clarity and word choice/ tone. In line with this, some coordinators provided various recommendations to improve the course, which are currently covered by the ENG501M syllabus. Three programme coordinators saw the need for more emphasis on oral presentation skills, which is in fact a minor component of the course and introduced in the latter weeks. One of them specified the need for an interview final exam, which they saw as a way for students to improve their confidence.

Insights from the ENG501M Teachers

Teachers handling the course were given freedom to implement the course content based on their teaching style and the needs of the students. Teachers could also adjust the duration of a specific writing lesson based on students' demonstrated understanding and outputs. Since there were

sessions conducted on site, teachers found the face-to-face interactions to be effective to address students' questions and clarifications. As adult learners, this set-up was valuable as it allowed the entire class to benefit from learning from one another. Meanwhile, teachers found online sessions more suitable for independent writing activities and consultations.

As a writing class catering to different specialisations, teachers reported that their feedback could sometimes be limited to writing principles. Although content is primarily the fundamental criterion of a good output, teachers could not be considered experts in giving suggestions on specific areas (i.e., engineering, psychology, marketing, computer science). As a result, the teachers felt limited and would encourage students to consult their respective departments on the content aspect of their outputs.

Interestingly, teachers still found several graduate students to lack confidence regarding their writing skills. Though improvements could later be observed, generally teachers found these students to be reserved. For instance, even when writing consultations were announced, only a few would initiate one-on-one consultation to improve their writing drafts. Students who attended writing consultations received clearer feedback and enriched interaction with their writing teacher.

Insights from the Students

Students enrolled in the writing course during the term of the curriculum review were asked to evaluate the course after completing it. These students are from different academic departments: Mechanical and Civil Engineering, Marketing, Psychology, Biology, and Education.

Across the three classes involved in the review, all 28 students rated the lessons of the current ENG501M syllabus as highly valuable and relevant to the requirements of their other courses. Students specifically expressed that the lessons on academic writing, summarising, paraphrasing, synthesising, effective use of library resources, article review writing, responding to writing assignments, and oral presentations not only provided them opportunities to develop their reading and writing skills, but also helped them meet the reading and writing requirements of their other courses, specific to their respective programmes. They also unanimously recommended that all graduate students enrol in this course, since it is an important "refresher course" on academic writing and reading and a way to ensure that graduate students are capable of meeting the specific

reading and writing requirements of their disciplines. This recommendation can be captured in one of the responses of the students, as shown below.

“Yes, I will recommend this to other new graduate students. Other courses expect us to know how to write effectively beforehand, but this course will help fill in this gap.”

– MS Civil Engineering student

While the students were overwhelmingly positive about the course, they also gave suggestions on how to improve the course. They cited disengagement from the tasks, the lack or absence of grammar lessons, and the overwhelming requirements as their concerns. Firstly, some students expressed their experience of disengagement when they were asked to work on research articles that are not relevant to their specialisation or programme. A student explicitly suggested that a more personalised approach, such as giving students choices on research articles that they want to work on, will improve their overall engagement and make their learning experience more meaningful. Secondly, one student suggested including a review of basic grammar lessons. While teachers do provide incidental teaching of commonly observed grammatical errors in the students' written work, the students felt that a regular grammar review should be incorporated into the course. Finally, students argued that the course workload can be overwhelming at times. They stated that they had to do practice writing and reading tasks that were not directly aligned with the course's learning outcomes and suggested that all tasks should help them build towards the course's major output and requirements.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the ENG501M graduate writing course review revealed valuable insights from the different academic departments, teachers, and students. All academic departments identified research articles as central to graduate writing and expressed their shared concern about specific writing skills: organisation, synthesising, and grammar. On the other hand, teachers acknowledged limitations in content expertise of the written output but found face-to-face interactions and consultations effective. Lastly, the students appreciated the relevance of the course to their fields of studies and noted the need for personalised content choices, basic grammar reviews, and streamlined workloads to align with learning objectives. Overall, the review suggests that ENG501M provides a strong foundation for academic writing, with potential for further refinement based on stakeholder feedback.

Based on the insights of the stakeholders involved in the revision process, particularly those of the enrolled students, the current ENG501M syllabus meets the reading and writing needs of the graduate school students. While this positive feedback was prevalent, the diverse perspectives, expectations, and experiences of the stakeholders highlighted opportunities for refinement. Thus, the revised syllabus will undergo changes, including topic realignment, task design modifications, and enhanced assessment practices. Specifically, a dedicated section on critical analysis will be incorporated into the academic reading component to enhance students' ability to critically evaluate scholarly materials. All reading and writing tasks will be re-designed to align with the target learning outcomes, ensuring relevance in terms of content, skills, and assessment criteria. Furthermore, assessment practices will be transformed to incorporate peer reviews into each learning outcome and refine the rubrics used to grade student outputs. These revisions, informed by the insights of the stakeholders, are expected to further strengthen the ENG501M syllabus, ensuring that it continuously meets the evolving needs of graduate students and effectively prepares them for the rigours of academic writing and reading.

The curriculum revision process described in this reflection serves as an exemplar for classroom teachers, encouraging them to embrace a holistic approach to curriculum revision that re-evaluates their pedagogical practices and decisions. By considering contextual factors in curriculum revision, such as the course's rationale, learning expectations, and the perspectives and experiences of instructors and students, teachers and curriculum designers can ensure that the learning experiences they design are directly relevant to the actual needs of students and the specific demands of their chosen disciplines – fostering more inclusive and equitable learning environments. Taking such a transformative approach to curriculum revision highlights the shared ownership of stakeholders over the curriculum, as well as the synergy between course content alignment with student learning objectives, and the university's mission of nurturing critical thinkers. By incorporating multiliteracies into future revisions, the ENG501M syllabus can become a more powerful tool for empowering students to critically engage with texts across modalities (Ugalingan, Flores, Garinto & Mante-Estacio, 2022) and develop the diverse communication skills vital for insightful research and impactful contributions to their fields.

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