

# Writing as a Design Art: Crossing Boundaries Between Disciplinarity and Rhetoricity in a University Business Program

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**Abstract** While writing courses often include instruction in rhetorical aspects of writing (i.e., learning to write), business content courses often assign writing as a tool for learning and assessing content knowledge (i.e., writing to learn), with little attention to students' rhetorical understanding of genres. This leaves students with an incomplete understanding of disciplinary genres and at a disadvantage in the workplace. We argue for a *writing-as-design* conceptualization of writing, which crosses the boundary between learning to write and writing to learn by helping students develop an awareness of purpose and reader experience within a disciplinary content course. Using a case study of business plan writing in a business content course, we examine instructional materials, interviews, and student writing to illustrate how business courses can leverage a writing-as-design conceptualization to improve student writing.

**Keywords** writing as design, learning to write, writing to learn, business plan writing, business writing instruction

## 1 Introduction

In university-level education, students are expected to write a variety of genres in their discipline of study, and students' ability to understand and produce these genres is a crucial part of becoming a full-fledged member of their discipline (Canagarajah, 2002; Duff, 2001; Johns, 1997). In the field of business, the ability to communicate effectively in writing is valued by employers and is a key to obtaining a job and advancing in one's career (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Conrad & Newbury, 2011; Lentz, 2013; National Commission on Writing, 2004).

Although content courses in business programs often require students to write discipline-specific genres (Zhu, 2004a), the teaching of writing is often seen by business faculty as being outside of their responsibilities. Many disciplinary (content-area) faculty feel that writing instruction is the domain of the English department and that required first-year writing courses should "ensure college students can write when they get to us" (Downs, 2013, p. 50). As a result, many disciplinary faculty use writing mainly as a tool to assess content knowledge, with little attention to students' rhetorical understanding of genres (Annous & O'Day Nicolas, 2015; Zhu, 2004b), often leading to faculty frustration with students' writing (Downs, 2013). Such a focus

on acquisition of disciplinary content knowledge through writing is often termed *writing to learn* in the writing pedagogy literature.

On the other hand, instruction in academic writing courses, such as first-year writing courses housed in English departments, typically focuses on developing students' awareness of audience, purpose, and other rhetorical exigencies with the goal of preparing students for future academic and professional writing demands. Such courses often include writing tasks that are thought to be generalizable across a wide range of writing situations that students may encounter in their academic and professional lives. This approach is often termed *learning to write* in the writing pedagogy literature. After completing these courses, students are expected to know how to write and to be able to transfer these skills to writing in their disciplinary content courses. However, there is little evidence that such transfer occurs (Smit, 2004; Wardle, 2007).

Thus, there exists a boundary between, on one hand, disciplinary content-area education and its focus on knowledge acquisition through *writing to learn* (and accompanying frustration with student writing), and, on the other hand, writing courses with a focus on rhetorical understanding through *learning to write* (and an unrealized assumption that the writing skills students develop will transfer to writing in their field of study or work). Previous research has suggested a number of obstacles that prevent the crossing of this boundary, including inconsistency of terminology across writing and disciplinary content courses, a lack of expertise in writing instruction among disciplinary faculty and in content-area writing demands among writing faculty, and a lack of explicit connection between the writing tasks students are taught to do in writing courses and those they are assigned in content-area courses (Nelms & Dively, 2007; Wardle, 2007).

We contend that the aforementioned perceptual boundary between disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary literacy (or between becoming a businessperson and writing/communicating like a businessperson) should be crossed in any business program. In this chapter, we argue for a rhetorically informed approach to writing instruction within disciplinary content courses. Specifically, we draw on concepts from the field of design to argue for what we call a *writing-as-design* conceptualization of disciplinary writing instruction. A writing-as-design approach goes beyond the typical boundaries of content learning by teaching students how to effectively communicate content while considering rhetorical purpose and how a reader experiences the text. In this chapter, we present a case study of how the teaching of business plan writing in an introductory business course was naturally conceptualized from a writing-as-design perspective, yielding positive outcomes in student writing at an English-medium university in the Middle East. Our point of departure is another introductory business course that relied on a writing-to-learn model that conceptualized writing as a tool for acquiring disciplinary concepts.

In the following section, we review the literature on business writing and discuss the writing-to-learn and learning-to-write conceptualizations of disciplinary writing and how they relate to writing as design. We then contextualize our study by describing a case study of an introductory business course which implemented a writing-to-learn model. Lastly, we provide a rich description of a writing-as-design case study, showing evidence of its positive impact on student writing.

## **2 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Situating Business Writing in Disciplinary Writing Research***

Writing is essential in business, and business employers prefer employees who can effectively communicate in writing for business purposes (Conrad & Newbury, 2011; Lentz, 2013). For this reason, many business programs offer undergraduate and/or graduate courses in business communication, focusing on the oral and written skills that business students need for the real world (Bogert & Butt, 1996; Knight, 1999; Sharp & Brumberger, 2013). While disciplinary writing instruction may be common in business communication or technical writing courses, many business content courses also include writing assignments, though often with little explicit writing instruction (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Zhu, 2004a). From interviews with business content faculty, Zhu (2004a) found that the faculty saw writing as a critical skill for students' future success and that this importance was reflected in business school policies regarding the use of writing assignments in business content courses. However, business content faculty expected students to transfer general academic writing skills from English courses to business writing, an expectation that has been found to be unrealistic (Hyland, 2002; Smit, 2004; Spack, 1997; Wardle, 2007). Many business faculty saw writing instruction as falling exclusively under the purview of the English department, with business content faculty having little to no role in teaching writing.

However, writing instruction is necessary in business courses since without instruction business students may not understand the varying expectations of different business genres (Canesco & Byrd, 1989; Forman & Rymer, 1999; Zhu, 2004a, 2004b). In addition, although many genres in business courses are similar to professional genres, students often have difficulty making this link without explicit instruction (Bacha, 2003; Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Campbell, 2002). Focused writing instruction has been found to improve student performance on business writing (e.g., Campbell et al., 1999; Pittenger et al., 2006); however, many business content faculty feel that they do not have the tools necessary to effectively teach writing (Plutsky & Wilson, 2001). This may be one of the reasons that most investigations of business writing have occurred in the context of business communication courses, rather than business content courses. Although many business communication and technical writing courses emphasize students' learning of rhetorical and linguistic features of business genres, this is often not the case in many business content courses. Instead, writing in many business courses is thought of as a tool for displaying acquisition of disciplinary concepts, a conceptualization known as writing to learn. This can be contrasted with other conceptualizations of writing, including learning to write and writing as design.

## ***2.2 Conceptualizations of Writing***

Outside the community of writing teachers and researchers, a dominant view posits that writing knowledge is of a piece with conceptual knowledge. That is, to write is to know that which one writes about. The syntax required to formulate the propositions of a subject matter carry the load of syntax required to communicate it. It is thought that knowledge and expertise, thus, are sufficient (not just necessary) for communicating it. Reciprocally, under such a view, the primary focus of evaluations of writing is to test the writer's acquisition of knowledge. This view of writing and writing education accounts for the behavior of so many content teachers who support student exploration of a subject matter and then assign a paper, oblivious to an art of "textual making" above and beyond acquisition of the subject matter concepts and terms of art. It accounts for the continued association of student writing and "blue book" responses, where teachers spot-check students' responses for accurate understandings of subject matter concepts.

In writing studies and writing pedagogy, this conceptualization of writing is known as *writing to learn*, or “writing as a means of acquiring information, understanding concepts, and appreciating significance” (Broadhead, 1999, p. 19). This contrasts with a *learning to write* conceptualization, which focuses on “acquiring the socially-mediated communication skills and genre knowledge appropriate to a specific discipline” (Broadhead, 1999, p. 19). Whereas writing to learn uses writing as a tool to stimulate and assess the learning of content knowledge through the act of writing (Britton, 1982; Knipper & Duggan, 2006), learning to write is concerned with the act of writing itself, including composing skills necessary for formulating ideas into text in ways that comport with the text’s social context (Bazerman, 2016). In the context of business education, many business faculty see the writing in business content courses as writing to learn and writing in English and technical writing courses as learning to write (Zhu, 2004a).

A large body of writing-to-learn research has shown that writing can substantially benefit the learning of content knowledge. Graham and Hebert’s (2011) meta-analysis of research investigating effects of writing instruction on reading comprehension and learning found that students’ comprehension of content knowledge increased through writing about that knowledge and that increased amounts of student writing was related with increased comprehension (see also a review by Klein & Boscolo, 2016).

Although research has found positive effects of a writing-to-learn approach, such an approach is insufficient in a number of ways. First, it may not be the most efficient way to learn content knowledge. Penrose (1992) found that although it may encourage learning to an extent, “writing may not be the best choice of learning activity when the goal is simply to gather factual information” (p. 476), and that “students who studied for a test retained more facts from their reading than students who wrote essays” (p. 488). Secondly, a focus only on content knowledge may omit opportunities for students to be socialized into their discipline by learning the communication norms and expectations of that discipline (Carter et al., 2007). Lastly, a focus on concept acquisition lacks contextualization. Cox, Ortmeier-Hooper, and Tirabassi (2009, p. 74) state that writing in many business courses is reduced to filling in “formulas and templates,” a common writing-to-learn method also used in some other disciplinary writing contexts (see, e.g., Burke et al., 2006). While templates may be tempting for faculty and for students due to their ease of use, they lack the “considerations of audience, word choice, tone, and many other concerns that a writer must negotiate” in order to effectively communicate information in real-world business contexts (Cox et al., 2009, p. 74). Similarly, Jablonski (1999) argues that a template-based “fill-in-the-blanks” approach to business plan writing is limiting because it does not consider the “rhetorical demands of specific situations” (p.110).

On the other hand, a strict learning-to-write approach is common in writing courses such as the first-year writing courses that are required at many universities. These courses aim to develop writing skills that students will need in their subsequent academic work across the curriculum and in professional contexts. Although there is variation across institutions and even among individual instructors, these courses typically focus on developing various kinds of knowledge necessary for generalized academic writing, including rhetorical knowledge (by analyzing and composing a variety of texts), critical thinking skills (by evaluating, interpreting, and synthesizing information from sources), an understanding of writing as a process (by drafting, reviewing, collaborating, and revising), and knowledge of conventional language use, source citation, and genre formats common in academic writing (Dryer et al., 2014). These are important and do lay a solid foundation; yet, the expectation that students will be able to transfer these generalized skills to the specifics of disciplinary content-area writing often goes unfulfilled

(Smit, 2004). Academic writing must be embedded in a particular context, or as Wardle (2017, p. 30) writes, “there is no such thing as writing in general; writing is always in particular.”

In the present study, we cross the boundary between writing to learn and learning to write with a conceptualization of *writing as design*, which focuses on how disciplinary content is communicated within the rhetorical exigencies of a specific disciplinary genre.

### 2.3 *Writing as Design*

A conceptualization of writing as design extends the learning-to-write approach commonly found in first-year composition to disciplinary content classrooms. Writing as design means that a writer uses language in purposeful ways. The writer takes rhetorical purpose, audience, and disciplinary context into account, and chooses language to create a designed effect on the reader. This may seem commonsensical, but as Kaufer and Butler (2000) argued in their theoretical formulation of writing as a design art, it is not. In contrast to writing to learn, writing as design emphasizes elements of written craft that support, but stand outside, subject matter foundations, such as rhetorical purpose and audience.

Relationships between writing and design have been discussed for many years (e.g., Buchanan, 1985, 1995, 2001, 2007; Crilly et al., 2008; Friess, 2010; Frith, 2004; Hart-Davidson, 2007; Kaufer & Butler, 1996, 2000; Sharples, 1996, 1999; Sheridan, 2010; Wrigley et al., 2009). Buchanan (1995) states that design and writing are similar in that they both have a rhetorical dimension and both are activities of invention. Drawing on Lawson’s (1997) definition of design, Sharples (1999) says that writing is a “conscious and creative communication with, and through, materials to achieve a human effect” (p. 60). Sharples outlines a number of similarities between writing and design, such as having goals that are flexible and broad and not having a singular process for achieving those goals. In addition, design tasks (including writing tasks) often do not have a defined end state, and designers (and writers) often continually try to improve the final product.

Kaufer and Butler (1996, 2000) formalized the conceptualization of writing as design under their theory of representational composition. They point out that theories and instruction of writing in schools in the U.S. have largely been dominated by structural accounts, and in response to this, Kaufer and Butler propose that writing be described and taught as a type of information design, envisioning texts not as words and clauses that form sentences and other linguistic units, but rather as ideas forming into design elements. In this theory, writers choose words and phrases to represent rhetorical effects that the reader experiences, creating an interactivity between writer and reader. Expert writers use their (sometimes implicit) knowledge of these design elements in ways that create desired effects in the reader. For example, an appeal to a reader’s values can be cued using words such as *justice*, *fairness*, and *happiness*; innovation can be cued by *breakthrough*, *cutting-edge*, and *state-of-the-art*; a result from a chain of thought can be cued by *because*, *owing to the fact*, and *on the grounds that*. As a skilled writer makes choices that invoke these rhetorical cues, there is a cumulative effect over the course of a text that shapes a reader’s understanding of the text.

The substantial difference when writing is thought of as a design art is illustrated by Herrington (1985), who compared students’ perceptions of writing in two chemical engineering courses, one a lab-based course and one a design-based course. Students in the lab-based course described the major purpose of writing as displaying the writer’s knowledge; however, in the design-based course, students described the purposes as convincing the reader and making the

text easier for readers to understand. Thus, thinking of writing from a design standpoint may considerably impact students' awareness of audience and purpose for writing. Similarly, Maun and Myhill (2005) describe high school students' perceptions of design in their written work. Even in high school, students were aware of design-related choices, and the effects that these choices had on the reader, such as using the words *exclusive* and *hand-crafted* to make a product sound more appealing. Although students were conscious of design-based linguistic choices, Maun and Myhill did not relate this to any specific genre or discipline.

Although the conceptualization of writing as design has been well developed, its application in teaching has not been explored extensively. Some studies that have investigated classroom teaching of writing as design have done so in the context of rhetoric education (e.g., Kaufer & Butler, 2000) or have focused largely on visual-spatial aspects of texts, rather than design of textual-semantic aspects (e.g., Hocks, 2003). In recent years, research on classroom implementation of a writing as design approach has begun to emerge (e.g., Helberg et al., 2018; Land, 2022; Wetzel et al., 2021), though little research has focused on writing in disciplinary content courses. The potential benefits of this perspective for disciplinary work were suggested by Ballard and Koskela (2013) for work in engineering, although without any description of how a writing as design could be implemented in instruction. Given the very functional nature of a writing as design perspective, it could be especially useful in disciplines that have highly functional, goal-oriented genres, such as business.

In the present study, we aim to answer the question *How can business courses cross the boundary between learning to write and writing to learn by leveraging a writing as design conceptualization to improve students' writing?* In answering this question, we present a case study of a business plan assignment in an introductory business course that naturally used a writing-as-design perspective. We provide an in-depth qualitative understanding of what is involved in a writing-as-design approach, illustrated by its application in teaching business plan writing and the impact on the resulting student writing.

### **3 The Present Study**

#### ***3.1 Context***

The present study arose from a larger study of disciplinary literacy development at an English-medium branch campus of an American university in the Middle East. Students at this campus are linguistically and culturally diverse, hailing mainly from the Gulf region, the greater Middle East, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Seventy-five percent of students attended English-medium (or Arabic and English-medium) secondary schools, and the average TOEFL iBT score was 97, indicating that students' English proficiency was "good" or "high" (Educational Testing Service, 2015). The business program offers courses of the same standard as on the university's main campus in the U.S., and is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

The larger study provided rare naturalistic data needed to understand teaching methods and student output in undergraduate education. We interviewed professors about the reading and writing demands of their courses, observed classes, and collected course materials and the writing that students produced. In our interviews with professors and classroom observations in

the business program, we were particularly struck by one professor, Professor Parker<sup>1</sup>, who taught an introductory business course in which, without any formal training in rhetoric or business communication, he taught a sophisticated genre-based and rhetorical understanding of business plan writing which comported with the writing-as-design approach described earlier. This contrasted with some other business faculty, such as Professor Smith, who had a view of writing that was closer to writing to learn. In the present study, we describe how writing was approached in the context of the business plan assignments in Professor Parker's and Professor Smith's introductory business courses.

Both Professor Parker's and Professor Smith's courses were introductory business courses, and had the same objectives and used the same textbook.<sup>2</sup> Both Professor Parker and Professor Smith had extensive experience in industry prior to assuming their academic positions. Professor Smith was relatively newer to teaching, with two years of experience teaching only at the undergraduate level, while Professor Parker had eight years of experience teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses.

### **3.2 Data**

In our analysis, we rely on 1-hour audio-recorded interviews with each professor about the writing demands and expectations of their courses and their approaches to teaching business writing. In these interviews, we specifically asked the professors questions about the role of writing in their courses and what genres students were expected to write. In both courses, the main writing assignment was a business plan. Our questions focused on the professors' expectations for this genre, challenges students experienced, and the course materials used to scaffold students' writing of business plans (e.g., sample texts). We also examined the assignment guidelines each professor gave to students. Lastly, our data included the writing that students produced. In both courses, students completed the business plan assignment in groups of four to five students. Although previous studies have investigated business writing at a macro level by analyzing instructional practices (e.g., Albi et al., 2014; Jameson, 2006) or at a micro level by analyzing student writing (e.g., Lim, 2006), few studies have included both. Thus, our study also crosses a methodological boundary by including a variety of data sources in our analysis, including interviews with faculty, instructional materials, and student outcomes, allowing us to gain a more complete picture of a writing-as-design approach in a business content course.

Because the focus of this paper is on the writing-as-design approach, we provide an in-depth description of Professor Parker's approach to the business plan assignment and how this conceptualization of writing impacted student writing. For additional context, we also give a brief description of Professor Smith's approach. Our analysis of the business plans written by students included four business plans from Business 100 (taught by Professor Smith) and five business plans from Business 110 (taught by Professor Parker). In particular, we focused on the executive summary of each business plan since it was present in all of the texts and served as the orientation to the text.

### **3.3 Text Analysis**

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Both courses were Introduction to Business; they had different course numbers because one (Professor Smith's) was for business majors and one (Professor Parker's) was for non-majors.

We conducted two types of text analysis, both of which reflect key rhetorical and linguistic aspects of the business plan genre. As the literature indicates, business plans are fundamentally arguments that use deductive logic and are generally based around a problem-solution genre structure (Lagerweft & Bossers, 2002; Trailer & Wolford, 2001; Zhu, 2004b). Thus, conducting a genre analysis of the executive summaries seemed fitting. According to Swales (1990), genre analysis involves identifying the rhetorical moves and strategies in a text, and how these moves fit together to achieve a communicative purpose. Our analysis focused on the moves in the executive summaries and examined the ways these moves contributed to the expected problem-solution genre structure. Since business plans are meant to be arguments, and arguments tend to include a great deal of evaluation (Hood, 2010; Liu & Thompson, 2006), our second type of analysis focused on the use of evaluations using the Appraisal framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal is a discourse analytic framework for the analysis of evaluations, and has been used extensively to investigate argumentation, stance taking, and reader positioning (see, e.g., Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011; Lancaster, 2014; Miller et al., 2014; Pessoa et al., 2017). This analysis allowed us to identify what was being evaluated, how it was evaluated, and how these evaluations contributed to meeting the problem-solution genre expectations. Together, these two analyses allowed us to provide a more complete picture of how a writing-as-design perspective can positively impact and enhance student writing.

## 4 Results and Discussion

We begin by briefly describing the business plan assignment taught by Professor Smith in Business 100, which reflected a writing-to-learn approach. We follow this with a more in-depth description of the business plan assignment taught by Professor Parker in Business 110, which reflected a writing-as-design conceptualization.

### 4.1 Business 100

Business 100 was an introductory business course taught by Professor Smith, who viewed writing as a tool for acquiring disciplinary knowledge. Similar to descriptions of business writing assignments by Cox et al. (2009) and Jablonski (1999), students in Business 100 were given a “Business Plan Template” and a sample business plan (based on the template). Students then wrote their business plans by filling in the template using concepts and terms of art from the field of business.

The business plan template consisted of sections, with a series of questions within each section. Each question had a “hint” describing how students should answer the question, with most (27 out of 37) targeting textbook knowledge, such as the following:

What form of business ownership (sole proprietorship, partnership, or corporation) will your business take? Why did you choose this form? *Hint: For more information on the types of business ownership, refer to the discussion of the different forms of business ownership in Chapter 3.*

All businesses have to deal with ethical issues. One way to address these issues is to create a code of ethics. List three core (unchanging) principles that your business will follow. *Hint:*



*To help you consider the ethical issues that your business might face, refer to the discussion in Chapter 2.*

Provide a brief mission statement for your business. *Hint: Refer to the discussion of mission statements in Chapter 5. Be sure to include the name of your business, how you will stand out from your competition, and why a customer will buy from you.*

The business plan assignment description in Business 100 instructed students to “answer the questions that make up each part in the order that they are shown,” allowing a single possible order of information in the business plan. The professor emphasized the terms of art of business, stating in an interview that, “[business] is a new language for them, and at the end of each unit I list out the vocabulary or new words for them.”

The sample business plan based on the template (4483 words) was titled simply “Sample Business Plan,” and introduced a business called The Friendly Café. It was clearly written for pedagogical purposes to teach the business plan template to students. The sample was printed in black and white, had few figures, and was written in an informal and personal style with short sentences that used personal language and an informal tone, as in the following:

Our business will be a partnership. My family members and I will run the café together. We are a close family, and we work well together. Financially, we could not open the café without each other. Each partner will serve as a manager in the café. My mother will be the floor manager, my aunt will be the grill manager, and I will handle the accounting for the café (Business 100 Sample Business Plan).

The structure of the sample business plan reflected the focus on concept acquisition, with subheadings that corresponded to chapter titles in the course textbook. Students’ writing followed the template’s structure, and largely focused on how well the business idea illustrated business concepts.

Evaluations in the students’ texts largely focused on the proposed company or its product, as seen in the below excerpts (evaluations are in italics and the target of the evaluation is underlined):

Welcome to [Middle East] Student Tutoring's business plan. MEST is a *one of a kind tutoring company* in [the Middle East]. [...] All in all our company offers *excellent tutoring services* with *maximum quality assurance* together with *maximum convenience* for the customer.

It is this belief in quality and the *importance* of our mission that makes us proud to provide knowledge to those who seek it.

MEST hires university students who will drive to their students’ homes and tutor them in a range of subjects. Our *highly competent tutors* will fulfill a number of requirements in order to ensure their abilities. First of all, they must be currently *enrolled at one of [the] highly selective universities [in the city]*.

Here, we see only positive evaluations, showing only that the company is *one of a kind* and that the services are *excellent*, with *maximum quality assurance*, *maximum convenience*, etc. Although this may show the quality of the company and its products, it does not demonstrate the need for the company within a problem-solution rhetorical mode. Overall, over 90% of evaluations in the Business 100 business plans were positive.

Overall, it was clear that the focus of the business plan assignment was the acquisition of business concepts, and there had been little attention to the use of rhetorically appropriate language to achieve the goals of a business plan.

## **4.2 Business 110: A Case of Writing as Design**

Unlike Business 100, Professor Parker's business plan assignment in Business 110 did not make use of a template. Instead, Professor Parker's description of the business plan assignment was largely focused on the purpose and audience of the text, and what kind of effect the text should have on the reader. This is clearly seen in the assignment guidelines Professor Parker gave to students, which described a business plan as "essentially an argument" where the business plan writers need to answer the question: "Why is the investor better off with his or her money invested in my business?" Professor Parker describes the focus of the business plan as being on "what the business plan should *do*" which is to obtain funding by "[defining] a significant opportunity or problem" and "[providing] a credible strategy" to solve it. According to Professor Parker, "You have a winner if you solve an important, valuable problem." Clearly, considering the purpose and audience for a business plan within a problem-solution rhetorical mode is important to Professor Parker. He further explained this in an interview:

Business plans are written for an investor audience, so whether or not you are raising money you are writing in a style which will appeal to those potential investors in your business so the first thing that has to be communicated is a sense of excitement about the opportunity you are presenting [...]. Then you have to convince the audience that the opportunity represents a potential for a significant investment and then that the team of people representing the idea are the right team to execute it (Professor Parker, interview).

Throughout his assignment guidelines, Professor Parker emphasized the importance of considering the audience and the purpose of writing a business plan:

Writing the plan concentrates analysis, forces decisions, and improves thinking. [The] process brings key employees together for a realistic, consistent plan. [It] provides a model from which changes can be evaluated. [It] provides a document for outside advice and budget costs to be established. [It gives an] indication of seriousness. [And it is] simplified communication. (Professor Parker, assignment guidelines)

Worth noting is that Professor Parker emphasized the importance of having the business plan in writing. According to him, "All outside supporters will ask for it. [And it] aids in attracting people and institutional support" (Professor Parker, interview)

Rather than focusing on filling out a template and using terms of art from the textbook, Professor Parker offered tips on how to best write the business plan to achieve the desired effect on potential investors. He stated in his guidelines that the students should have an argument that

emphasizes “desirable characteristics” and a new, original idea. Practical writing tips are given as well: “Construct the argument in bullets, be sure each is supportable. Get it all down. Then worry about the order.” Once the ideas were down on paper, the students were advised to come up with “a great story line” and to use it to “connect with the audience, build credibility, [and] get and hold attention.” At the same time, because investors are busy, the students were instructed to “write for a skimming reader using figures and bullets.” In Professor Parker’s conceptualization of business plan writing, there was a clear audience in mind for the business plan, and writing was described not as using terms of art in a prescribed template, but as a process of brainstorming ideas and then arranging them to grab the audience’s attention, connect with them, and have a strong, credible argument. These ideas reflect a desire to achieve a human effect on an audience, a key aspect of writing as design discussed by Sharples (1999) and Kaufer and Butler (1996, 2000).

In addition the assignment guidelines, Professor Parker also gave students three sample business plans written by his previous undergraduate and graduate students. The businesses proposed in these plans were ones that had actually been funded, lending authenticity to them as successful business plans, rather than texts written for pedagogical purposes only. The differences from the sample business plan used in Business 100 were striking. First, the sample business plans in Business 110 looked like authentic business documents in terms of design. They were much longer (average number of words: 9262); they were printed in color; they included a title page with the name of the business (e.g., ClearCount Medical Solutions) followed by “Business Plan.” The names of the team members and the faculty advisor were listed, followed by a contact e-mail address. An outline with the content of the plan and the page numbers followed on the next page. Subheadings, lists with numbering and bullet points, tables, figures, and diagrams were used throughout the plan. Second, although the Business 110 sample plans had many of the same subheadings, such as *Executive Summary* and *Marketing Analysis*, each was different in layout and in their order of presentation of the information. Clearly, the writers of these plans did not follow a template and had put thought into how the information was structured and presented. Third, a disclaimer at the bottom of the title page made this document look more real and authentic. The disclaimer read:

This document and its contents are the sole property of the ClearCount team. By reviewing this document, you agree to the confidentiality of the information contained herein. (Business 110 sample business plan)

Although the plans were written for the purposes of a class, the disclaimer shows that they were also written to be read by a specific audience and with the purpose of seeking funding for an original idea.

The most striking difference between the two sets of business plans was the emphasis in Business 110 on problem solving through an original idea. This original idea was set up as a solution to an existing problem. As in the Business 100 plans, the importance of the product was described; however, the Business 110 plans took into consideration how the product or company solved a problem rather than just describing the product or company itself. They referenced data and existing conditions and problems (using sources) that the business ideas would solve. They were also written in a more formal tone than the Business 100 sample plan with references to the company, rather than the people who will run the company, the problems in the medical field they seek to solve, and how the proposed product aims to solve them. In line with the

conceptualization as writing as design, the sample business plans in Business 110 read like arguments with the desired purpose of convincing a group of investors to fund a company that would be successful by solving an important problem.

This conceptualization of business plan writing resulted in student business plans that were structured using a problem-solution mode, as discussed in the literature (e.g., Trailer & Wolford, 2001; Zhu, 2004b). For instance, (1) is an excerpt from a Business 110 student business plan that starts with the description of a global situation with relevance to a local situation that has led to a problem, namely the high cost of telecommunication for immigrants to the country, as seen in (2). Given this situation and problem, the proposed product sought to provide a solution, namely the development of a new telecommunication solution, stated in (3). The introduction and description of the proposed product was followed by an evaluation of the limitations of existing solutions, as seen in (4).

(1) Opportunity: The world serves as home to approx. seven billion (7 Bn) or more people. Not all these people are on the same piece of archipelago floating around. Yet rapid globalization has created the need for a person on one end of the world to communicate, perhaps with someone on the other end.

(2) Taking [this country] as example, immigrants here do not always have the comfort of spending hours talking to their loved ones back in their home country because of high international calling charges failing to take advantage of handy and comparatively inexpensive VOIP service.

(3) Mission Statement: MEVoip has come up with the perfect solution that makes use of today's advanced technology and global communication modules, VOIP to come up with one easy, efficient, effective and inexpensive service to bring you vocally closer to anybody, anytime, anywhere in the world.

(4) Available Solutions: There were cheaper yet relatively efficient modes of communication available, for people who were aware of other options like VOIP made use of these services, but this still did not help the laborers. However there were limitations to these as they required net connectivity, a computer, things that were obviously hindrance to portable options of communications.

This analysis shows how the students in Business 110 wrote business plans that responded to a problem or situation that had not been adequately addressed by existing products, thus generating a need for their proposed product. The business plans were argumentative, used a problem-solution rhetorical mode, and sought to create a specific effect in the reader (Kaufers & Butler, 1996, 2000; Sharples, 1999), namely for the investor audience to feel that the company will be successful because it fills a need in society. As a reader and audience of a business plan, an investor may be more persuaded to fund a business plan that aims to solve a problem rather than one that focuses on describing the greatness of a product without having an immediate impact on society. As discussed by Lagerwerf and Bossers (2002), in the real world, an absence of the proper genre features, in this case the problem-solution features that create the argumentative nature of business plans, could decrease the likelihood of an investment.

We conducted an Appraisal analysis of the executive summaries in the five business plans produced by students in Business 110. In line with the use of a problem-solution rhetorical mode, the Appraisal analysis revealed that the targets of evaluations included market conditions, a

problem that needs to be solved, and competitors and their products, as observed in (5) (targets of evaluations are underlined, evaluations are in italics).

(5) WiFiU's services *solve two major problems*: (1) *the lack of relatively cheap, high-bandwidth, well distributed internet access to the estimated 750,000 active internet users in the [the country]*. According to research done by our business, on average it *costs an active internet user about [\$600]/month for high-profile internet access* through the currently available telecommunication companies. Clearly, *this amount of money is not affordable* by the middle class citizens in [this country] (2) Marketing solutions that target specific customers who are present within the proximity of a certain business is currently not available in [the country]. (Business 110, business plan 1)

The phrase *solve two major problems* is a positive evaluation of WiFiU's services. Following this, there are negative evaluations of existing services: internet access to the country's users is lacking in terms of value, bandwidth, and distribution, while currently available telecommunications companies are evaluated as costing a large and unaffordable amount of money. Following this is a negative evaluation (*currently not available*) that shows the market conditions for the company's services.

Overall, the Business 110 plans included 30% negative evaluations and 70% positive evaluations. This is in comparison to only 10% negative evaluations and 90% positive evaluations in Business 100. The larger proportion of negative evaluations in Business 110 represents evaluations of the current situation, establishing the market for this new company by showing the current problem or the limitations of existing solutions or competitors, as observed in (5) above and in (6), (7), and (8) below. These evaluations help to establish the problem that is to be solved, showing the need for the product.

(6) The high demand in the market *is not being satisfied*, the market *lacks ethics*, the provided services *have mediocre quality and lack comprehensiveness [...]*. (Business 110, business plan 2)

(7) We have noticed that [the campus], a growing community, *lacks many essential places for students living on campus*. (Business 110, business plan 3)

(8) The rates imposed by the single telecommunications firm *would snatch off a high percentage of their income*. (Business 110, business plan 4)

In (6), by negatively portraying the current market condition as not satisfying the high demand of the customers and as being unethical and "mediocre," the student writers express the need for their product. Similarly, in (7), the student writers negatively evaluate the current situation of student housing by emphasizing how it "lacks many essential places for students living on campus" to propose the implementation of a convenience store on campus. In (8), the existing telecommunication company is evaluated negatively through a description of its high service fees being a financial burden. In contrast to the overwhelmingly positive evaluations in the Business 100 student writing seen earlier, the Business 110 plans strategically used negative evaluations to make the case for the proposed company and the problem it would solve in order to more effectively convince an investor audience to invest in the company.

## 5 Conclusions & Implications

In this study, we have introduced a conceptualization of business writing instruction that crosses the boundary between disciplinarity and rhetoricity – that is, between accurate display of disciplinary knowledge on one hand, and strategic use of language to create a designed reader experience on the other. We have argued that this writing-as-design approach can be effectively applied in business content courses to enhance students' writing of business genres. This approach to writing is starkly different from a writing-to-learn approach that is often used in business content courses. While conceptualizing writing as a type of design has been discussed previously, there has been little research on actual application in the classroom, particularly in the context of disciplinary writing.

As exemplified by our case study of Professor Smith's course, Business 100, the goal of the business plan assignment was for students to acquire disciplinary concepts and vocabulary through the use of a template. This is similar to some previous descriptions of tools for writing to learn in content courses (e.g., Burke et al., 2006). However, as argued by Jablonski (1999) and Cox et al. (2009), the use of templates in business writing can be limiting because templates expose students to neither the situatedness of real-life writing nor the rhetorical elements that writers must consider to craft texts that communicate information effectively. The instructional goals of Business 100 concentrated largely on students' acquisition of the terms of art of business, and instructional materials did not mention the purpose or audience of the business plan or the goals of what the text should *do*. Student writing reflected this orientation by not implementing a problem-solution rhetorical mode, with little attention to persuasion of the audience to invest in the business. The Business 100 business plans were not structured as an argument to convince an investor audience of the feasibility of the business venture. In essence, business plan writing in Business 100 was not seen as the writing of a functional genre, but rather an opportunity to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge.

In contrast, Business 110 used a writing-as-design approach, which involved crafting a text to have specific effects on the reader, realized through linguistic and rhetorical choices (Kaufer & Butler, 1996, 2000; Sharples, 1999). This draws on learning-to-write principles that are common in courses such as first-year composition, but extends these to the specific context of a disciplinary content course. In line with notions of writing as design, purpose and audience were made explicit to students in the instructional materials used in Business 110. As a result, these business plans met the genre expectation of the business plan as an argumentative genre. According to Trailer and Wolford (2001) and Zhu (2004b), business plans are fundamentally arguments that use deductive logic, and are generally based around a problem-solution rhetorical mode, as observed in the Business 110 plans. This conceptualization of business plan writing is likely to achieve a greater persuasive impact because an investor is more likely to fund a business that can show its feasibility by filling a real-world need.

We recognize that learning disciplinary concepts may be a necessary focus of introductory courses; however, this can be done through other mediums such as multiple choice or short-answer tests. As Penrose (1992) suggested, when the goal is to assess content knowledge, writing may not always be the best assignment. An additional problem with using disciplinary genre writing assignments for concept acquisition is that it, at best, gives students an incomplete understanding and, at worst, an incorrect understanding of real world writing expectations (as emphasized by Jablonski, 1999), potentially furthering the dissatisfaction that many businesses feel about new employees' writing (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). This was seen, for example, in the simplistic and overly positive Business 100 business plan sample. Engaging in

disciplinary writing goes beyond displaying acquired knowledge; rather, “it is through writing in a discipline that students learn the patterns of reasoning, the habits of mind, of those in the discipline” (Penrose, 1992, p. 491), as emphasized by Professor Parker in Business 110. Conceptualizing writing as design can help faculty to develop students’ understanding of reasoning and habits of mind in business, even among novice writers in introductory courses, such as Business 110. If given adequate tools, students are able to meet disciplinary expectations (see also Maun & Myhill, 2005).

Overall, a writing-as-design perspective crosses the boundary between the learning-to-write approach of general academic writing courses and the writing-to-learn approach that is common in disciplinary content courses. It does so through instruction that makes the rhetorical expectations of disciplinary genres explicit for students. Such instruction, however, necessitates that business faculty be aware of rhetorical expectations of the genre and the discipline and be able to communicate these to students in a clear manner (as Professor Parker was). We recognize that not all faculty are as rhetorically aware as Professor Parker in this study, and that for many faculty, rhetorical expectations are mostly implicit. Thus, there is a clear opportunity for conceptual and curricular boundary crossing wherein writing faculty work together with disciplinary faculty to analyze disciplinary genres and identify their rhetorical and linguistic features (for a discussion of the benefits of such collaboration in business content courses, see Carnes et al., 2001; for examples of such collaborations, see Gomez-Laich et al., 2019; Mitchell & Pessoa, 2019; Pessoa et al., 2018; Pessoa et al., 2019, Pessoa et al., 2022). Explicit instruction can be conducted through genre-based pedagogy (Martin, 1992; Rose & Martin, 2012), particularly utilizing the Teaching/Learning Cycle (Martin & Rose, 2005; Rothery, 1994). Such collaborations will allow faculty in the disciplines to engage in instruction of disciplinary genres that makes genre expectations clear and better prepares students for the real world.

The present study has illustrated boundary crossing in multiple ways. Methodologically, it demonstrated the benefits of crossing the boundary between macro and micro-analytic approaches to the study of language education. By analyzing a variety of data including course descriptions, assignment descriptions, interviews with faculty, and student writing, we were able to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of what a writing-as-design approach to disciplinary writing looks like. Importantly, the present study crosses the conceptual boundary between disciplinarity and rhetoricity, or the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge and the ability to express that knowledge effectively in writing. This is particularly important for curriculum and instruction in English-as-medium-of-instruction (EMI) contexts, such as the present study, because students may need more explicit instruction on how to use language effectively for real-world purposes in their field of study.

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