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## **Incorporating Fink's Integrated Model to Developing Writing Courses in College**

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**ABSTRACT:** *To strengthen the teaching quality of writing courses and students' active learning, a writing course design based on Fink's integrated model is presented. With the analysis of situational factors, the proposed course highlights the interactive integration of learning goals, feedback and assessment, and teaching and learning activities. The four primary activities in such a course are discussed in detail. The results can not only develop students' writing skills in a holistic way, but also provide them with significant learning experience.*

**KEYWORDS:** Integrative perspective, writing course, college

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A college writing course often lacks efficient teaching content for students to develop critical thinking and intercultural communication competence. Articles in writing textbooks are not only difficult to guide students to integrate what they have learned in genuine situations, but also difficult to encourage students to learn actively. Writing is often accomplished under the complete domination of the instructor, with little room for the learner to write freely and creatively. In addition, the content of writing courses is greatly emphasized on the knowledge of writing skills, and the overall curriculum planning fails to properly guide students to understand multiculturalism from the local culture and neglects the development of affective factors such as attitudes in interpersonal communication. Such a learning style cannot develop students' profession, interpersonal relationship, intercultural communication competence, tolerance and adaptability to change.

To address these issues, many scholars have begun to focus on ways to optimize the quality of writing courses through improved curriculum design (Thompson & Kamler,

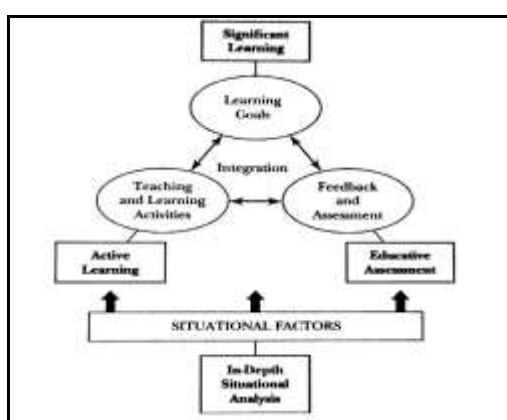
2013; Craig, 2013; Savage & Mayer, 2006; Zhu, 2001; Badger & White, 2000; Susser, 1994 among others). The paper attempts to describe how the integrated model proposed by Fink in 2003, 2013 can be applied to an writing course. To elaborate his theory of significant learning experience, Fink (2003, 2013) notes that significant learning occurs only when students are engaged and there is high energy in the classroom. The result is a significant and lasting change in students' learning as well as a long-term impact on their lives. Meaningful learning creates change in the learner. Learners don't just know more information, but they also know what more information means, how to use it, and how it affects themselves and others. A traditional content-centered approach to teaching and learning focus on the breadth of mastery of the basics, while a learning-centered approach expands the learning process to include deeper types of learning, including integration, humanistic aspects, and a greater understanding of what makes people more efficient lifelong learners. Accordingly, Fink (2003, 2013) suggests that by incorporating these deeper forms of learning into the classroom, instructors will come closer than ever to teaching their dream course.

### **FINK'S INTEGRATED MODEL**

As is well known, most instructors want students to learn more than just expertise. Other learning goals may refer to larger projects or worldwide interactions. Fink (2013) groups this larger learning focus into six groups, and claims that the so-called significant learning occurs when six key components work in conjunction to enhance each other. The more key components an instructor includes in his lesson, unit and course, the more significant the learning will be for the student. The six key component, which he calls significant learning categories, are Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration, Human Dimension, Caring, Learning How to Learn. These goals are not hierarchical; instead, they all overlap and intersect at what Fink calls Significant Learning. Courses should include all of these types of goals, which help to move the focus of a course far beyond content acquisition. It is suggested that instructors use these categories to analyze a course's current learning outcomes to determine if there are categories that are not properly represented (Fink, 2013).

In addition to the six learning categories, Fink (2013) provides an integrated model for teachers to apply to specific courses with the aim of pursuing new teaching techniques and improving teaching efficiency. The paper adopts the model, which target both the active learning activities and educational assessment to assist students in creating key learning experiences. The course design emphasizes learning goals, teaching and learning activities, and the interactive integration of evaluation and feedback (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Adapted from Fink (2013: 141)



The primary activities of the curriculum design weight the interactive integration of learning goals, teaching and learning activities, assessment and feedback, helping students gain knowledge in writing and intercultural fields, integrate diverse knowledge with life, learn to communicate with themselves and others, and pay attention to changes in attitudes, interests, and values. It also supports students in acquiring self-sustainable learning skills.

Situational factors play a crucial role in Fink's integration model in that they include information related to the course content, the stage of the course, the characteristics of students, the relevant knowledge and skills of students, the knowledge base of teachers, the teaching skills of teachers, etc.

Through active learning, students not only absorb and remember knowledge, but also participate in learning through experiences and reflections. Experience includes practice and observation. In the development of professional knowledge students will

explore and research in different situations or specific themes in the form of individuals or groups. By completing tasks or projects, students can implement learning by doing, thus improving their application of English, active learning and teamwork ability.

Fink proposes educative assessment and feedback that underscore forward-looking assessment, which means that the assessment focuses on assessing whether students can apply what they have learned in different situations, rather than understanding and remembering the knowledge taught in the classroom, in contrast to the traditional approach to feedback and assessment that is typically based upon backward-looking assessment, with exams that look back on what was covered during the last several weeks and aim simply at determining whether the students “got it” or not (Fink, 2013: 93). For instance, instructors get used to saying to the students, “We have covered topics x, y, and z. Did you get it?” In forward-looking assessment, teachers look ahead to what they expect or want students to be able to do in the future as the result of having learned about x, y, and z. The relevant question then becomes, “Imagine yourself in a situation when people are actually using this knowledge. Can you use your knowledge of x, y, and z to do this?” (Fink, 2013: 95)

### **THE CURRICULUM FOR WRITING COURSES**

A prominent feature of Fink’s model is its integration, which combines Learning Goals, Teaching and Learning activities, and Feedback and Assessment, in aid of the analysis of Situational Factors. The two-way arrows between the three ellipses indicate that the three are closely connected and integrated (cf. Figure 1). Explicitly, before the beginning of the writing course, instructors can first analyze situational factors, propose learning goals, then present feedback and assessment, and finally design teaching and learning activities. Instructors can adjust their learning goals and teaching activities based on the feedback and assessment, and the adjustment of teaching activities will in turn lead to corresponding changes in students’ feedback. In the following, a college writing course is provided by describing its corresponding Situational Factors, Learning Goals, Feedback and Assessment, and Teaching and Learning Activities.

### **Situational Factors**

To effectively substantiate the situational factors proposed by Fink (2013), teaching object, teaching content, teacher's knowledge and teaching content are elaborated below.

#### ***Teaching object***

The writing course is primarily designed for English majors in college. Before studying this course, the students have already studied most of the basic courses, such as English Grammar, English Reading, Basics of English that are related to this course, so they have mastered writing to a certain degree. They have learned principles such as unity, clarity and conciseness required for writing. In addition, most of the English majors have great class discipline, strong desire for knowledge, and high learning motivation. Most of them have already determined to become English teachers in junior and senior high schools after graduation. Writing courses can influence and motivate students, as the internship in their senior year, that is, teaching English in a junior high or elementary school, is closely related to the knowledge of the course.

#### ***Teaching content***

In terms of teaching materials, in addition to the textbooks prescribed by the college, texts and writing resources related to intercultural communication should be supplemented. Due to the lack of literary training in writing courses, it is easy for students to have a narrow perspective on learning. The proposed course design starts from reading anthologies of related literary works written in English and teachers' supplementary materials, impels students to understand multiculturalism and the current globalization topics including international trade, tourism, food, etc. Teaching resources might include multimedia classrooms, online courses, PPT courseware, footage presentations, etc. Also, students are also encouraged to organize or write related contents through group activities, or to draw materials from various media sources for planning course materials on their own, thereby enhancing their learning motivation and interest.

### ***Teacher's knowledge***

Most of the writing instructors should have degrees of Linguistics, TESOL, Applied Linguistics or profession that is highly related to writing. They need to have long-term adherence to English language teaching or writing. They have offered writing courses before, and have accumulated a lot of practical teaching and learning experience related to writing courses. The instructor's knowledge of writing should be relatively solid, whether the knowledge is associated with academic writing, argumentative skills, or common writing errors and regulations.

### ***Teaching content***

Fink presented his taxonomy for a systematic approach to course design that went beyond the usual focus on content. He encourages instructors to create learning goals based on his taxonomy of significant learning rather than relying on a content-driven method of course design. In terms of teaching materials, in addition to the textbooks prescribed by the college, texts and writing resources related to intercultural communication should be supplemented. Due to the lack of literary training in writing courses, it is easy for students to have a narrow perspective on learning. The proposed course design starts from reading anthologies of related literary works written in English and teachers' supplementary materials, impels students to understand multiculturalism and the current globalization topics including international trade, tourism, food, etc. Teaching resources might include multimedia classrooms, online courses, PPT courseware, footage presentations, etc. Also, students are also encouraged to organize or write related contents through group activities, or to draw materials from various media sources for planning course materials on their own, thereby enhancing their learning motivation and interest.

### **Learning Goals**

Fink (2013) defines a significant learning experience as one that engage students, makes them enthusiastic about the subject, promotes long-term learning, and helps students see the value of material in the world around them. As we have mentioned earlier, Fink divides learning into six categories: Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration, Human Dimension, Caring, Learning How to Learn. The challenge is creating and designing those experiences. To hit all six categories successfully, significant learning experiences have to be designed into the course. Put

another way, the course itself needs to be a significant learning experience.

It is difficult to reach all these six types of learning objectives in a writing curriculum. Nevertheless, instructors should cover as many different learning categories as possible when possible. The more learning categories included in the course objectives, the greater the mutual support between the categories, and the more valuable student learning. Fink also encourages teachers to combine their own dreams when designing the curriculum learning objectives (Fink, 2013: 91). Combining teaching situational factors, an instructor's dream and course features, a learning goal table for the course "Advanced English Writing" is shown below.

**Table 1:** Content of Learning Goals

| <b>Learning Goals</b>         | <b>Content of Learning Goals</b>  |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>Foundational Knowledge</b> | Learners are familiar with the key points and terminologies of writing, such as descriptive, narrative, expository, persuasive, word choice, parallelism, cover letter, etc.  |
| <b>Integration</b>            | Learners are able to connect and compare the writing knowledge learned in the past with the new knowledge learned in this course.   |
| <b>Application</b>            | Learners are able to write correct and fluent English that they have learned, and further teach or explain materials related to writing.  |
| <b>Human Dimension</b>        | Learners can explore the characteristics of writers reflected in their writing, such as obstinacy, stability, sincerity, capriciousness, etc.   |
| <b>Caring</b>                 | Learners can develop an interest in writing, thus becoming a writer, journalist, novelist, etc. and making an impact to the society and world.  |
| <b>Learning How to Learn</b>  | Learners are not only familiar with the features of writing, such as cohesion, unity, text features, intercultural knowledge, etc., but able to use extracurricular resources, such as course websites, lecture videos, British and American films, TV series, etc. for further self-study. |

### Feedback and Assessment

Following Fink's model, we have four steps in feedback and assessment for a writing course curriculum. The following is a full discussion of pre-course assessment, in-process assessment, students' feedback and formative assessment.



### ***Pre-course assessment***

To offer a forward-looking assessment, instructors can organize a quiz or ask questions before the course begins so as to test the student's mastery of the course. For example, one can ask students whether they are familiar with common writing errors, such as run-on, sentence fragments and dangling modifiers. In so doing, instructors can provide supplement materials needed with learners in the follow-up courses, thereby increasing their Foundational Knowledge and the chance to reach other learning goals.

### ***In-process assessment***

In addition to the professional knowledge, instructors should provide review and questions regarding the previous class, thus enhancing the effect of each stage of learning. As to the students' assignments or reports, instructors should remark them in time, and correction, guidance and feedback should be given. Moreover, teachers can ask the students to discuss and share opinions in groups to strengthen their learning efficiency.

### ***Students' feedback***

After the first lecture in the beginning of the course, instructors collect students' opinions on the learning objectives of the course and make timely modification. In the course of teaching, instructors employ email or network platform to gather students' opinions on the course, as well as the opinions on the teaching methods, assignment remarks and grading policy, thus encouraging instructors to make adaptation in the coming future.

### ***Formative assessment***

The assessment and scoring of students' performance should invite them to participate to ensure the fairness of the results. Thus, for formative assessment, instructors' grades, students' grades in self-assessment and peer review should be included, in tandem with common assessment goals in writing such as content, organization, accuracy, unity and coherence. According to Fink (2013)'s Fidelity feedback, teachers should return the score sheet and give feedback to students on their learning regularly and promptly. For students' performance in forward-looking activities, teachers should provide students with differentiated feedback based on the assessment goals.



When giving students suggestions and remarks, teachers give them back to students in a loving way. That is to say, through empathy, mutual understanding and care, students can better receive feedback.

### **Teaching and Learning Activities**

Fink (2013) has suggested that instructors should incorporate active learning into their courses in an effective way. They need to build learning activities that include all three components of active learning, including Getting Information and Ideas, Experiences (doing and observing) and Reflecting (on what one is learning and how one is learning). To approach active learning, he also proposes three strategies, say Create Rich Learning Experiences, Find New Ways to Introduce Students to Information and Ideas, and Promote In-Depth Reflective Writing on the Learning Process. For writing courses, we can design teaching activities from the following perspectives to promote students' active learning.

#### ***Creating rich learning experience***

Teachers can combine the manifold features of writing courses to create rich learning activities for students. For instance, instructors can require students to keep a journal from the perspective of a character in a book, TV series or film, to write short a novel about their superheroes, or to write a persuasive essay to convince the jury of one's innocence.

#### ***Introducing information to students via various ways***

In addition to importing knowledge to students through textbooks in class, teachers can also arrange extracurricular activities for students to learn on their own. They can also provide students with well-known writing works, research reports and academic papers. Audio-visual materials, online materials and footages related to the course lectures can be supplied for students to learn after class. Students can also learn from the micro-classes with pictures, texts and images derived from modern education technology. To further practice their writing and develop intercultural competence, students are encouraged to make international pen pals and learn from them actively. In addition, instructors can create Facebook or Twitter groups to share latest English writing materials.

### ***Encouraging students to reflect***

Reflection is a process where students describe their learning, how it changed, and how it might relate to future learning experiences, though it is a skill that often goes undervalued in classrooms that are packed with content. In fact, reflection is an important practice for students to make sense of and grow from a learning experience. Teachers should help students reflect what they have learned and encourage students to develop a timely response to their own learning. In light of Fink (2013)'s suggestion on reflection teaching and learning, instructors are encouraged to design two-phase reflection activity: a one-minute oral summary and portfolio. They can ask students to elaborate what they have learned for one class at the end of it to the whole class or to a group in one minute. After the oral summary, each student should summarize the content and record it in his personal study diary, i.e., portfolio. Therefore, learners can quickly review what they have learned in the future, which is conducive to students' creation of significant learning experience. Teachers should also diagnose student's portfolios to track each student's learning progress and give feedback at the right time.

### **CONCLUSION**

Referring to Fink's integrated model, this paper provided a preliminary exploration of the curriculum design of a college writing course. The course is designed to pave the way for students to gain significant learning experiences. By completing such a writing course design, instructors can consider the situational factors, learning goals, feedback and assessment, and teaching and learning activities of the course in a holistic and comprehensive manner at the beginning of the design process to ensure the quality of their courses. As an exploration of the course design for writing, this paper provides a reference for the design of other English skills courses, especially those with a specialized focus. Fink's integrated model is illuminating for the design of language courses and further empirical studies are needed to verify its usability.

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