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Article

Teaching and Learning in a First-Year Writing Skills Transfer Course: Investigating College Professor and Student Experiences

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Abstract

When Seneca Polytechnic replaced EAC150, an essay-based English course, with COM101, a first-semester writing course based on writing skills transfer, we saw the opportunity to investigate both professors' and students' experiences of the new approach. Specifically, we wanted to know how professors conceptualized and taught COM101 and also how students connected their writing for COM101 with other writing they did at Seneca, their workplaces, and in their personal lives. From 2018–2020 we conducted qualitative surveys with professors and mixed-question surveys with

students and applied inductive, thematic coding to all qualitative data. The data results were encouraging: student responses indicated that COM101 positively affected their writing and reported transferring writing skills to other areas of their lives. In addition, professor responses indicated that they actively engaged with skills transfer pedagogy, despite the fact that COM101 demanded a significant change in approach. In professor responses that indicated resistance to the new approach we found valuable lessons about the core ideas of transfer, including negative transfer, and the difficulties that anyone – professors and students alike – face in new learning situations.

Introduction

COM101: Communicating Across Contexts is a compulsory, first-semester writing and communications course for students in diploma, advanced diploma and certificate programs at Seneca Polytechnic in Toronto, Canada. COM101 was first offered in the Fall semester of 2018, replacing the previous course (EAC150: College English) which had been taught, in various iterations, since 1985.

COM101 represented a fundamental change in guiding philosophy, readings, and assessment: while EAC150 took a literary, essay-focused approach to developing reading and writing skills, COM101 asks students to read and write for multiple contexts to foster transferable writing skills. We anticipated this would be a significant shift for professors, as few - if any - were previously trained in a skills-transfer approach to writing. This situation is not unique to Seneca; as Clary-Lemon (2009) showed, from the mid-1950s until the mid- 2000s, the teaching of writing was equated with the teaching of literature at the majority of Canadian post-secondary institutions; this was strikingly encapsulated in Northrop Frye's 1958 claim that the goal of postsecondary writing instruction was not to teach effective communication or workplace skills but rather "the verbal expression of truth, beauty, and wisdom" (as cited in Clary-Lemon, 2009, p. 95). And, although research into writing skills transfer in American universities showed encouraging results (for example, Driscoll (2011) and Robertson & Taczak (2017)), we were unsure how this approach would be experienced by our diverse student population. Given these considerations, our research sought to investigate how, or indeed if, COM101 affected students' ability to consciously transfer their writing skills to other writing situations. Considering the newness of the course, we felt we would not be in a position to evaluate students' skills with certainty and consistency. Therefore, we focused on analyzing professors'[1] and students' experiences of teaching and learning in COM101.

In the following paper, we describe the philosophical and pedagogical foundation of a writing skills transfer approach within our specific educational context at Seneca Polytechnic. Next, we outline the methodology of our three-year research project and discuss general results from the student perspective. Finally, we reflect on one key barrier to successful skills transfer - i.e., negative transfer - which surprisingly revealed itself in the resistance to COM101 by a minority of professors, manifesting as anxiety about students' writing mastery as well as concerns about the "rigor" and value of the new writing skills transfer approach.

Skills Transfer and the Seneca Context

Defining Skills Transfer and Negative Transfer

The *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer,* a consolidation of research developed by a multi-institutional team, defines successful writing skills transfer as the act of transforming or repurposing writing knowledge and prior learning experience when facing new and difficult writing situations (*Elon*, 2014).

Several studies (Beaufort, 1999; Beaufort, 2007; Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Driscoll, 2011; Wardle, 2009) have shown that students fail to transfer skills from first-year writing courses to other writing for a variety of reasons. In some cases, students do not see the relevance of their first-year writing course to other writing situations (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Moore, 2012), especially if they do not recognize similarities between writing tasks or situations (McCarthy, 1987). In other cases, students see academic writing as a one-off performance for a grade instead of a method of acquiring skills applicable to other courses and their professional lives (Baird & Dilger, 2017; Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007).

One impediment to successful skills transfer is negative transfer, in which learned conventions become ingrained as inflexible rules, preventing the writer from adapting to the demands of a new situation – as when students produce five-paragraph essays in response to writing prompts calling for entirely different forms (Gorzelsky et. al, 2016; Hill, 2016). Negative transfer can also take the form of resistance or transfer denial, in which writers resist seeing the connections between former and new learning (Roberston, Taczak & Yancey, 2012; Taczak, 2022). Recognizing that skills-transfer has occurred is another difficulty. In their longitudinal study, Driscoll and Cui (2021) found that students reported using writing skills and knowledge but did not connect these things to prior

learning: "78% of transfer that occurs is often "invisible" to [students], or they may re-attribute where knowledge comes from over time" (p. 230).

Teaching for Skills Transfer: Metacognition & Genre

The *Elon Statement* (2014) identifies three evidence-based practices that promote writing skills transfer: helping students develop metacognitive awareness (e.g. knowing what to ask in order to learn new writing situations); making skills transfer and metacognition an explicit part of the curriculum (e.g. by modeling transfer-based thinking); and developing curricula based on rhetorical analysis (e.g. genre, purpose, audience, context). Skills transfer also increases when students are engaged in more authentic writing tasks (Baird & Dilger, 2017; Graff 2010; Jackson, 2010; Yancey, 2016).

Metacognition of writing has been defined as "reflection across writing tasks and contexts, using writing and rhetorical concepts to explain choices and evaluations and to construct a writerly identity" (Gorzelsky et al., 2016, p. 225). Metacognition in writing-based courses can be developed by identifying skills transfer as a primary learning outcome (Yancey, Robertson & Taczak, 2014), by helping students build explicit knowledge about writing (Downs & Wardle, 2007), and by asking students to reflect on their writing choices (Devitt, 2014; Donahue, 2012).

Teaching about genres helps students to abstract writing conventions (organization and structure, linguistic features, variations) from a range of genres (Devitt, 2014). When combined with a rhetorical approach, genre pedagogy enables students to discuss genre conventions in context, showing how different audiences and purposes call for different writing choices. Researchers argue that the overall goal of this approach is to produce "students who are expert at learning writing skills in multiple social contexts rather than expert writers in a single context" (Beaufort, 2007, p. 8; see also Clark & Hernandez, 2011). Because genres are culturally-specific, there are concerns that a genre approach can add to the cognitive load of English learning (L2) students; on the other hand, it can also offer an explicit and systematic method of analysis that can benefit L2 learners (Hyland, 2007).

Another important practice in writing skills transfer is helping students to read like writers. Reading with a focus on an author's writing choices and skills increases metacognition and promotes skills transfer (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Robertson & Taczak, 2017).

Notes on the Seneca Context: English Language Learners and Part-time Professors

Many studies on writing skills transfer focus on American university classrooms, with only a few (for example, Cozart et al. (2016), DasBender (2016), and Tardy (2006)) mentioning English language learning (L2) students. There were few studies of transfer in community colleges when we began our research in 2018; Tate (2015) looked at transfer at a two-year community college, but with primarily L1 students. Tinberg's 2017 study of transfer in a community college classroom does not mention L2 students, nor does Blaauw-Hara's 2014 study of transfer in community college general education assignments. Our research project breaks new ground by investigating teaching for skills transfer at an Ontario college with a significant population of L2 students, and a significant number of contract or temporarily-employed professors.

First, it may be valuable to note that community colleges in Ontario were traditionally designed for an applied education geared towards a specific career, wherein graduates were prepared to enter trades or applied fields (Seneca, n.d.). COM101 is designed for students in diploma-level studies with a majority of these students enrolled in career-focused programs such as flight services, computer programming, graphic design, accounting, and early childhood education.

A Key Performance Indicator (KPI) survey taken by Seneca students suggested that 49% of Seneca's students "are not born in Canada making Seneca one of the most culturally diverse colleges in the system" (Seneca, 2018). Many students in Ontario colleges, disproportionately relative to Ontario universities, are lower-income, people with disabilities or exceptionalities, additional language learners, new Canadians and/or first-generation students to enroll in post-secondary education (Colleges Ontario, 2018). In these ways, Seneca's students differ from the student demographic we encountered in previous studies on writing skills transfer.

While both students whose first language is English (L1) and English learning students (L2) find it difficult to transfer knowledge from one domain to another (Tardy, 2006), writing skills transfer can be even more difficult for L2 writers, whose difficulties are "linguistic, rhetorical, stylistic, and genre-bound" (DasBender, 2016, p. 295). L2 students often bring different rhetorical approaches and genre knowledge into their first-year composition course (Cozart et al., 2016; Sullivan, Zhang and Zhang, 2012). Left unacknowledged, these differences can produce negative transfer. For L2 students, the demands of writing in another language combined with unfamiliar rhetorical strategies

and genres can make all the activities in a writing course seem new and unrelated to prior writing (DasBender, 2016).

An additional consideration in introducing a skills transfer approach is the number of contract professors at Ontario colleges: in 2017 it was estimated that 70% of the workforce in Ontario colleges was part-time or sessional (Viau, 2017). It is a challenge to implement a course requiring an unfamiliar approach without making a precariously employed group of professors more vulnerable in the face of demands for re-learning. To support professors teaching the new course, professors and Chairs organized monthly information sessions, drop-in discussions and email updates, and created a common site for shared resources.

COM101: Course Design and Roll-Out

COM101 uses a peer-reviewed reading bank of 300+ open-access readings in multiple genres, and includes a range of writing assessments: a summary, academic argument, researched responses for nonacademic scenarios, formative assessments, and final exam. For the exam, students write one academic response of at least 200 words, and one transfer response of at least 400 words in a specific genre (e.g. email, letter, blog post, speech). Although the format of the exam is the same for all course sections, professors adjust the questions based on their selected course readings and genres. Core rhetorical elements underpinning the course include purpose, audience, language and tone, genre, and persuasion through logic, emotion and credibility.

COM101 was designed by a committee of professors with input from Chairs across the institution. The initial plan for a pilot project was replaced by a full roll-out in Fall 2018 to ensure all students had access to the same communications curriculum, and to provide a robust sample to evaluate the new course across all faculties. However, the shift in plans from a small pilot to a full roll-out resulted in an expedited timeline and meant that teaching resources were still being produced as professors prepared to teach the course.

Methodology

Initial Design and (Pandemic) Adjustment

In anticipation of the significant shift to COM101, we sought to understand how professors and students experienced COM101 over three semesters in three years: the initial Fall 2018 term, the Winter 2019 term, and finally the Fall 2020 term. Because we felt we would not be in a position to

evaluate students' transfer skills with certainty, based on the newness of the course and the limited number of studies set in a similar educational environment, we focused on analyzing professors' and students' experiences of COM101, guided by three related questions: How is COM101 conceptualized according to professors? How is COM101 taught by professors? How do students connect COM101 with other contexts? The research project received clearance from Seneca's Research Ethics Board.

We completed three distinct rounds of data collection. In the initial two rounds of data collection (2018-2019), we analyzed COM101 addenda (course schedules), conducted a two-part qualitative survey with professors, and conducted mixed-methods surveys with students. Our final round of data collection was reimagined in part from lessons learned, and in part because of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, we did not collect addenda in 2020 as the data had not yielded concrete insights about the course while requiring significant resources to process. We also adjusted the professor surveys in 2020 from two 5-question surveys (10 questions in total) to one six-question survey. We did so considering the increased workload in transitioning to fully online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. We also adjusted the 2020 questions for clarity and added a new question about the online delivery of COM101. We also added a question to the students' surveys to ask them about their experiences of course delivery. Prior to the pandemic, the vast majority of COM101 students were in-person; however, during the pandemic, COM101 suddenly shifted to fully online.

Quantitative Addenda Analysis

Led by the question, "How is COM101 conceptualized according to professors?", we sought to compare the ways professors organized their COM101 course on their addenda by analyzing 144 addenda: 73 unique Fall 2018 addenda, and 71 unique Winter 2019 addenda. Because COM101 seeks to encourage academic freedom while maintaining consistency across numerous sections, we were keen to see how professors organized the course and examined the assigned readings and assessment types most listed by professors. However, we did not continue with addenda collection in 2020 insofar as addenda provided scant and scattered insight into the ways professors were organizing the course.

Qualitative Surveys with Professors

To answer our question "How is COM101 taught according to professors?", we developed a two-part qualitative survey delivered through the online platform eSurv.org for the Fall 2018 and Winter 2019

semesters. In the Fall 2018 semester, out of 89 full- and part-time professors, 30 professors participated in Part One of the survey and 31 responded to Part Two, or 34% and 35% respectively. In the Winter 2019 semester, out of 58 professors, 8 professors responded to Part One and 13 to Part Two, or 14% and 23% respectively.

Similar to surveys deployed by Driscoll (2011), we initially designed the professor surveys in two parts to investigate changes to professors' perceptions of skills-transfer over time. The first five questions, distributed as a link to an electronic survey by email during the first weeks each term, asked about professors' approach to setting up COM101, and the final five questions, distributed in the final weeks of term, asked professors to reflect on their semester teaching COM101 (see Appendix for Table 1: Professor Survey Questions 2018-2019). All questions were open-ended, and all answers were submitted anonymously online, with informed consent.

In Fall 2020, we deployed one, streamlined six-question survey for professors (see Appendix for Table 2: Professor Survey Questions 2020) in which out of a total of 83 professors, 16 responded or 19%. Like the previous survey, all answers to the open-ended survey questions were submitted anonymously upon receipt of digital informed consent. All responses were recorded anonymously; thus, in our analysis of responses to each question, we are not able to confirm if comments are from the same person or different people.

Mixed-Question Survey with Students

Finally, to shed light on our question "How do students connect COM101 with other contexts?", we conducted mixed (open and closed) question surveys with students who took COM101. Our survey approach was inspired by several writing skills transfer studies which ask students to reflect on themselves as writers as well as their experiences in their first-year composition course (Driscoll, 2011; Clark & Hernandez, 2011; Cozart et al., 2016; Fishman, 2012; Sternglass, 1997). Overall, out of a total of 15033 potential COM101 student participants, we had 1866 students participate in our survey. In the Fall 2018 semester, out of a total of 6543 potential student participants, 739 students participated, or 12%; in the Winter 2019 semester, out of a total of 3761 potential student participants, 500 students participated, or 13%; and in the Fall 2020 semester, out of a total of 4729 potential student participants, 627 COM101 students participated, or 13%.

In Fall 2018 and Winter 2019, we asked students five questions: all questions began with a quantitative option, or a closed set of options, followed by an opportunity for qualitative responses, or open questions (see Appendix for Table 3: Student Survey Questions 2018-2019). We partnered

with Seneca's Centre for Institutional Data and Enterprise Analytics (C-IDEA) who distributed students' informed consent and surveys through Qualtrics. C-IDEA then organized the raw data and provided demographic information using students' registration information including gender, first language, and residency. Thus, the identities of all student respondents were kept confidential from the researchers. Additionally, it is worth noting that all student participants completed the surveys without compensation or incentives.

In the Fall 2020 semester, we added a sixth question around online delivery, with both closed and open response options (see Appendix: for Table 4 Student Survey Questions 2020). We also tweaked some of the questions for better student comprehension. In one case, this tweak possibly affected our data. C-IDEA once again facilitated informed consent and surveys through the platform Qualtrics.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data from professor and student surveys, 2-3 members of our research team manually used two-cycle inductive coding: first, we used an "in vivo" approach to coding, wherein researchers leverage "words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p.74); second, we derived themes through thematic pattern generation as discussed by Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014). Next, to enact our multiple coding approach, the 2-3 members of our research team who coded met to compare their inductive themes. An additional research member who did not code acted as the discussion facilitator to help develop the list of key themes. Consensus was met through discussion, debate and adjustment (Sweeney et al., 2013). In every case, we coded without the use of a coding software, in part to ensure themes were consistent with the context from which they were derived.

In the subsequent discussion section, we focus on the most frequently selected quantitative responses, and the most prominent qualitative themes (i.e. the most mentions by students). In representing the qualitative data, we include the number of respondents who gave answers related to the themes as well as the total number of qualitative responses received for that (sub)question, as well as the corresponding percentages. These percentages are meant to indicate the frequency with which that particular theme arose in responses for that question and should not be interpreted to indicate a representative sample of the total population of COM101 professors or students.

Discussion

Students' General Experiences of COM101

In all three rounds of student surveys, we first asked the closed-option question, "Since you've taken COM101, is there any difference in the way you write?" and offered yes or no options. On average across three rounds, 64% of all students selected "yes."

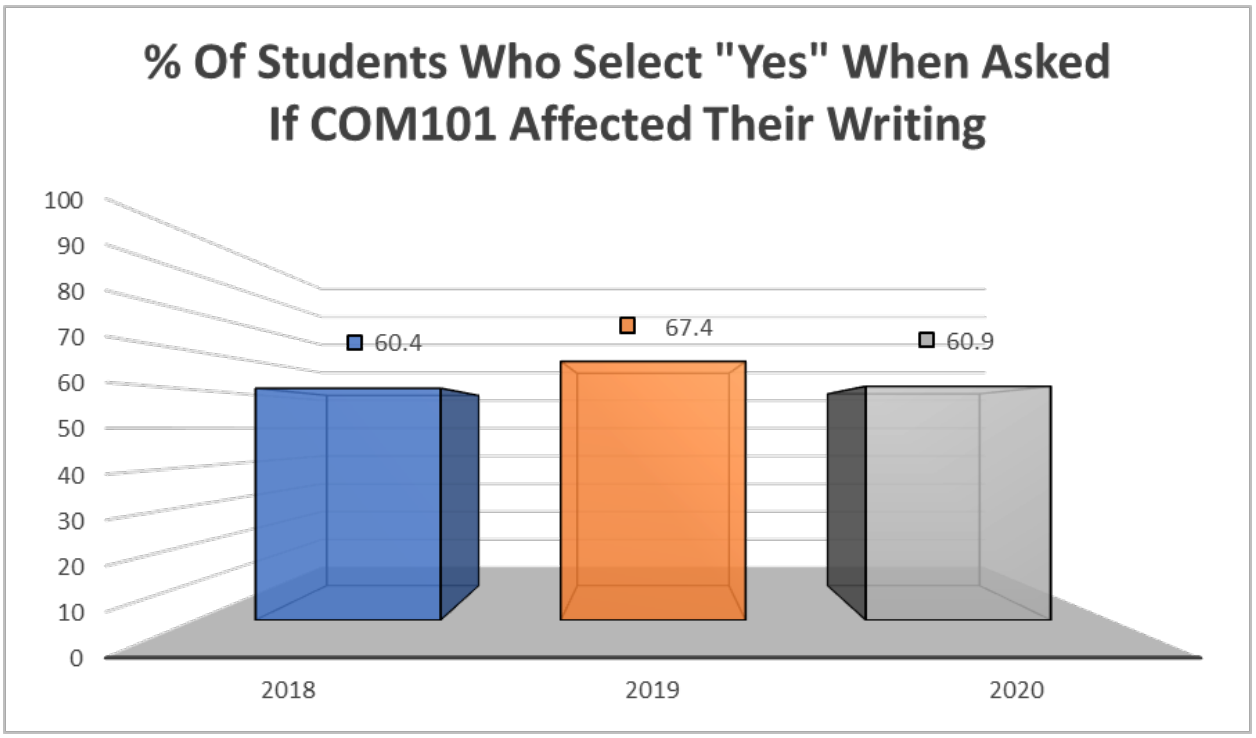

Figure 1. Responses to Question 1 over three years

Students who selected "yes" then had the opportunity to provide qualitative responses to explain how COM had affected their writing. The most commonly stated effect was an improvement in grammar (31% of 314 responses in 2018; 24% of 310 responses in 2020). We found this interesting: while COM101 professors are free to include grammar, whether as rote lessons or "just in time" interventions through grading feedback (Hern & Snell, 2013), it is not an official part of the curriculum nor addenda. While we don't have a clear insight into why so many students noted grammar improvements, we can appreciate that writing more requires more engagement with the building blocks of writing: what we are saying, and how we are saying it. It's also possible that despite

taking a writing course with no direct grammar instruction, students still thought of good or improved writing in grammatical terms. If so, then the scope of learning for those COM students is narrower than intended and may be linked to prior learning. Students' ideas about good writing, as Driscoll (2011) showed, can be "fairly narrow and defined by their experiences in literature-based English classes in high school and middle school" (p. 14). In this case, it would be unrealistic for a single 14-week course to uncouple the idea that good writing = good grammar which may have been the core idea for decades of a student's prior education. This is perhaps most especially true of L2 learners. Regardless, acknowledging an improvement in grammar reflects students' feelings that their writing foundation had strengthened after taking COM101.

In a survey design oversight, our 2018 and 2019 surveys failed to provide an open-text box for students who responded "no" to Question 1. In 2020, after adding this option, we noted the dominant theme in the qualitative responses was students' prior learning or skills; 30% of 168 responses mentioned learning COM101 concepts previously in high school or in other post-secondary courses. One student wrote, "I've just graduated high school after taking university English for all of high school. A lot of the concepts I had already know [sic]. However, the email section of the course was useful as it is not something taught in high school." The other top themes included frustrations with the teaching approach or the professor (18%) and not seeing the relevance to their program or life (8%).

This notable cohort of students, for whom COM101 felt repetitive or unchallenging, may signal an opportunity for us as writing instructors. We might encourage students to reflect on which genres or approaches to writing they want more practice in, and challenge them to work on writing in new ways.

L2 Experiences of COM101

As discussed previously, Seneca's context is distinct from those represented in the predominantly American, university-based studies which inspired our move to a skills transfer model. With a particular curiosity about English learning and multilingual students, we paid attention to the differences between students who self-identified as L1 and L2 in response to Question 1. As noted, this information was supplied to Seneca by students upon enrollment and was associated with our survey data by C-IDEA. However, this language information was not volunteered by all survey respondents, and because Seneca ceased mandatory writing assessments to place students into COM in 2019, we only have data with robust L1 and L2 differentiation from the cohort of survey

respondents in 2018. For instance, in 2018, C-IDEA was able to confirm the first language for 652 out of 727 total respondents, or 90% of our survey participants. In contrast, in 2020, they could only identify the first language for 309 out of a total of 627 respondents, or 49% of participants. Thus, our insights into the contrast between L1 and L2 responses became diluted over the duration of our three-year student survey as our institution was provided less "first language" demographic information.

When reviewing the results by language demographics, we consistently found that students who self-identified as L2 selected "yes" at a higher rate across all three years: on average, 70% of L2 students selected "yes" to Question 1, "Since you've taken COM101, is there any difference in the way that you write?", as compared to an average of 56% of L1 students. These results stood in contrast to our concern that the demands of writing in another language combined with unfamiliar rhetorical strategies and genres would interfere with skills transfer, as some studies (such as DasBender, 2016) suggested. However, L2 students also seems to share the conflation between "writing improvement" and "improved grammar" alongside their L1 counterparts. For instance, out of a total of 314 qualitative "yes" responses for Question 1 in 2018, there were 56 references to grammar and associated writing mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) by L2 students and 63 references to grammar by L1 students.

Examining Skills Transfer: The Most Relevant Writing Skills and Genres In and Out of School

From a list of several closed options (see Appendix, Tables 3 and 4, "SSQ2" and "SSQ3" for all closed options), students consistently selected "identifying my writing purpose" as a skill they used in courses at Seneca (43% in 2018, 46% in 2019, 50% in 2020). For instance, in 2020 one student wrote, "I made sure I understood what I was writing about and made sure my paragraph is consistent [sic] on the thing I was talking about." Students' selection of "purpose" as the focus of their school writing might reflect their desire to understand the professor's expectations for a given assignment in order to achieve a desired grade. Writing instructor John Warner (2018) argues that when writing in school, "autonomy is sacrificed in the name of compliance … as the external motivation of good grades or avoiding punishment becomes the sole reason to exhibit the desired behavior" (p. 79). In contrast, students' "out of school" survey selections demonstrate more of an awareness of situational nuances: thinking about language, tone and audience before/while writing.

From a list of several closed options (see Appendix, Tables 3 and 4, "SSQ2" and "SSQ3" for all closed options), students selected "adjusting my language and tone" as the skill most often used outside of school (33% in 2018, 16% in 2019, 22% in 2020). One 2018 student wrote, "This helps me determine the tone I will use in my writing. I write more formally when writing to work colleagues and less formally when writing a social media post." Ultimately, when students thought about the applicability of COM101 to writing outside of school, they seemed to connect their language use to varied contexts, for example, specifically adapting to a workplace audience by increasing their formality. In school, where the audience (professors) remains fairly constant, students seemed focused on short-term, goal-driven outcomes ("what is my purpose for writing?"), whereas their focus for out-of-school writing, where the audience is constantly changing or even unknown, seemed to shift to craft ("how do I 'best' create my message for this audience or context so that I'm heard and understood?"). Or, said another way, students' selections for out-of-school writing indicate they are becoming "students who are expert at learning writing skills in multiple social contexts rather than expert writers in a single context" (Beaufort, 2007, p. 8). Their responses also indicate the metacognitive awareness of their rhetorical choices as writers, as identified by Gorzelsky et al. (2016). This outcome links to Seneca's mission to equip students with flexible professional and human skills, making them world-ready for various careers and workplaces (Seneca Polytechnic, 2023).

Practicing different genres is an important way to practice skills transfer (Devitt, 2014), so we sought to understand which genres Seneca students found most useful, as well as which ones they encountered as chosen by their COM101 professors. From a list of several closed options of possible genres, including "other", we found consistent patterns in genres students selected as most relevant both for use in and outside of school (see Appendix, Tables 3 and 4, "SSQ2" and "SSQ3" for all closed options).

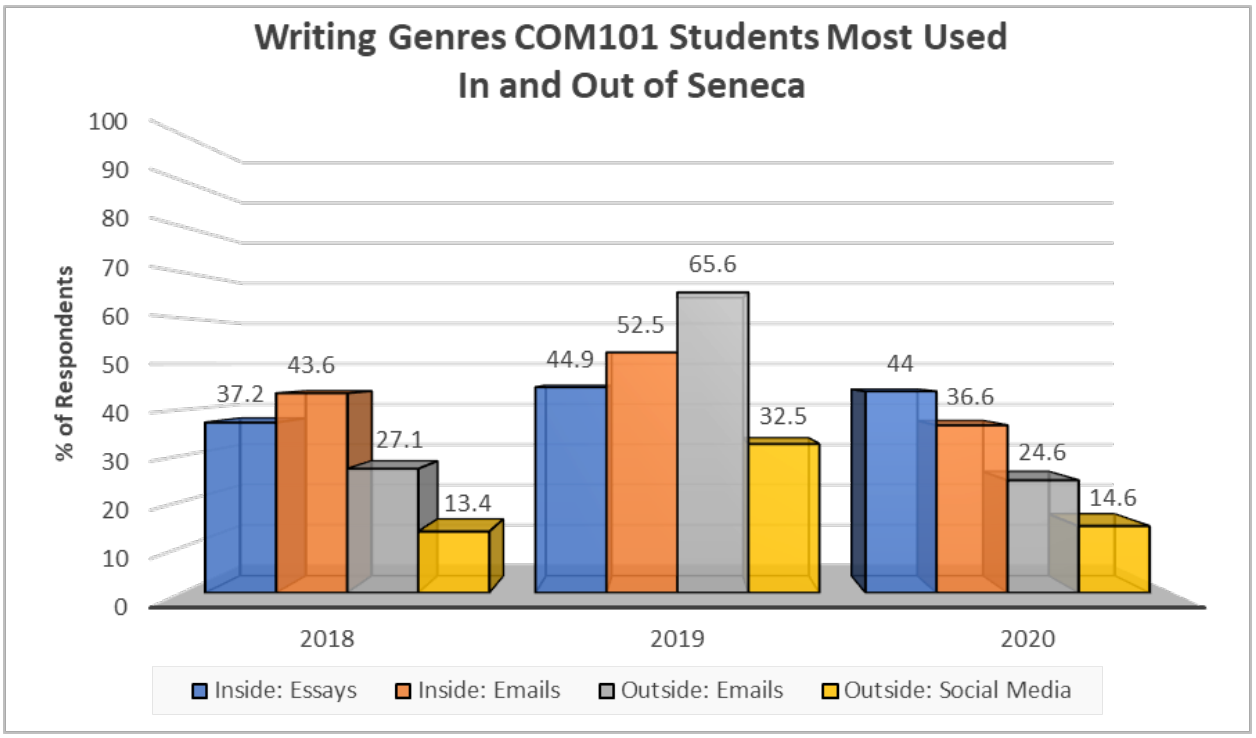

Figure 2. Writing Genres Students Most Used In and Out of College

Essays and emails were the two most frequently selected genres students used in school (see Fig. 2: Writing Genres Students Most Used In and Out of College). Across all three years, students' top qualitative responses about school-related emails mentioned emailing professors (31% of 134 responses in 2018; 33% of 80 responses in 2019; 28% of 97 responses in 2020).

With essays, students consistently submitted qualitative responses indicating they felt they had strengthened their general essay skills and citation practices across all three years (13% of 109 responses in 2018; 19% of 69 responses in 2019; 35% of 97 responses in 2020). In 2020, a student wrote, "Composing academic essay [sic] is very hard for me. Especially with my [redacted program] course that my Professor doesn't really explain his expectation with our essays. However, using my knowledge with COM101, it becomes a little bit easier to actually compose an essay because I already learned about academic structure."

When asked what skills or concepts they used outside of Seneca, students most frequently identified email and social media in all three surveys. Writing in the workplace was the key theme arising from qualitative answers for email outside of school (48% of 119 responses in 2018; 38% of 72 responses in 2019; 51% of 75 responses in 2020). In 2018, a student reflected, "I write many

emails for my job and my emails almost looked like texts now I know that emails are professional and need to be detailed all in one email."

Consistently, the second-most selected genre relevant to students outside of school was social media, with qualitative responses relating to crafting messages for social media platforms (27% out of 55 responses in 2018; 46% of 26 responses in 2019; 42% of out 36 responses in 2020). In 2019, a student noted they had "become very cautious as to how and what i [sic] write. Extra care is taken to only post things making sure it is not offensive nor can it be defined differently." In 2020, a student noted, "In the world as we know it today, it is a helpful prompt to be mindful of my writing and messaging techniques, as we all are communicating remotely."

Overall, student responses indicated that the genres they encountered in COM101 were useful to them. Not surprising, academic writing was useful only at school, whereas qualitative responses about social media and email showed a broader application with more nuanced attention to audience and context.

Professors' Experiences of COM101

As discussed previously, COM101 represented a profound shift from a literature-based composition course, with the academic essay as the primary mode of assessment, to a skills-transfer course with academic and non-academic writing genres. Survey responses by professors in Fall 2018, Winter 2019, and Fall 2020 suggested that overall, despite difficulties caused by the college-wide rollout without a pilot course, the majority of professors engaged with the ethos of COM101: teaching writing skills transfer. In the figure below, we demonstrate 62% of the total 54 professor responses could be grouped thematically to describe skills transfer (30 respondents, Fall 2018; 8 respondents, Winter 2019; 16 respondents, Fall 2020).

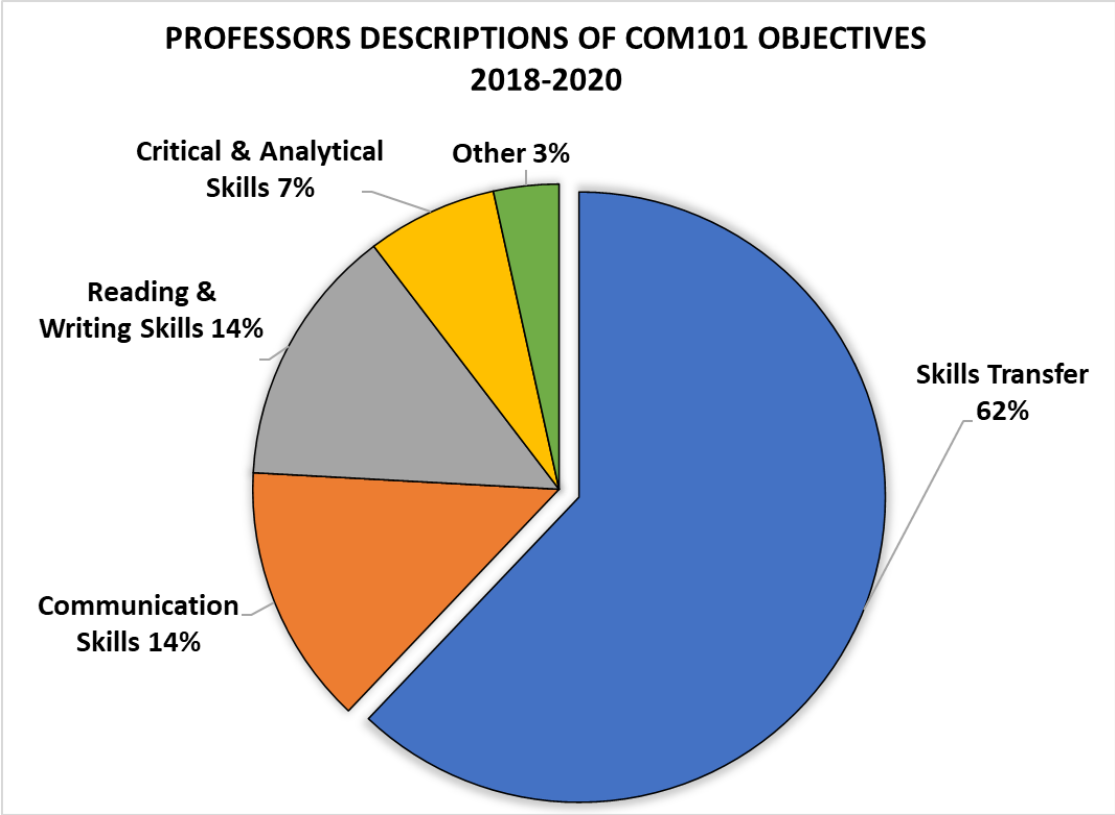

Figure 3. Professors' Descriptions of COM101 Objectives (2018-2020)

For example, one Fall 2018 professor's description of the course objective not only described skills transfer but identified the connection between reading and writing as a way of facilitating it:

> I believe that the objective of COM101 is to get students to both read and think as writers. […] Reading as a writer means that you look not only at what is written but at how it is written. It means asking questions about choices that writers make....what mode, what style, what voice, what tone, what rhetorical devices to use etc. Once students begin to look at reading as writers do, they can then apply these tactics to their own writing because they better understand that these were not accidental happenings but deliberate decisions that a writer took.

However, some dissent and anxiety over the new approach was also evident in professors' qualitative responses. Although the overall percentage of dissenting commentary over the years was small, we chose to look at these views closely to see what they might reveal about teaching for skills transfer. In addition to anxiety or confusion over what a skills-transfer approach would entail, two main

themes emerged: one was a concern that the new course could not allow for genre mastery, and the second was a desire to refocus on academic essays to restore 'rigor' and prevent 'simplicity'.

Professor Anxiety About Foundational Changes in Teaching Writing

First, we noted some confusion over the new approach. One Fall 2018 professor wrote, "Transfer still is not a term or concept that has been clearly explained to me." In some cases, the way the confusion was expressed was telling. Another Fall 2018 professor wrote:

> I've said it before, but I'll say it again. Transfer is a canard. To teach transfer, you need to teach structure: you can't go from the physics of flight to flying…I firmly believe that there is no teaching transfer. I'll give another example: say you want to transfer from academic writing to 'blogging' (more on that later, I hope). What, precisely, does that mean, apart from a general idea that *blogs are less formal and should be easier to understand?* To *transfer to actual writing, the students must know, with certainty, what 'informal' means: active voice, contractions, questions, anecdote--and structure* [emphasis added]. It is simply impossible to teach otherwise. It's all talk, no action. Our students demand and deserve to know how to write, not to know about genres.

Another response expressed similar ideas:

> "Writing requires more than genre awareness*; it requires knowledge of structure and structural expectations* [emphasis added]. This is a profound failure in the course….Transfer must be defined (or, honestly, replaced). It must be made clear what, precisely, you expect. I'm afraid that the one-hour presentation and readings are insufficient. If we must teach transfer, we *should be teaching transferable skills, not transferable ideas* [emphasis added]."

We were struck by how these two professors seemed to disregard the approach of skills transfer while insisting upon the importance of various elements of transfer pedagogy that were aligned with the vision of the course. These responses suggest that a skills transfer approach is by no means self-evident.

Secondly, several professors expressed concern that the new approach would prevent students from mastering the genres they were learning. One Fall 2018 professor wrote, "It takes journalism courses to write newspaper articles; they have a structure: Lede, nut-graf and 5wH, anecdote, pyramid. Without knowing the *structure* of an article, they are completely incapable of writing one, even with all the information in the world about genre and transfer." However, genre awareness, rather than mastery, is a key component of skills transfer. As Clark and Hernandez (2011) point out,

focus on mastery alone might allow students to replicate a new genre in isolation, whereas genre awareness helps students see how the particular conventions of style and structure work to fulfill a specific purpose.

A skills transfer approach encourages students to write in multiple genres, meaning that faculty also must learn to write and teach in some unfamiliar non-academic genres. Teaching new genres also raised concerns about professors' own mastery as writers, as expressed in this response from Fall 2018: "Although I have a very clear idea of what constitutes a good essay and what I am looking for when I teach essay writing, I do not have as clear of an idea of what I am expecting when I ask students to write in some of the other genres available to us. Therefore I need to develop a more precise idea of what constitutes a good review, article, editorial, letter, etc." This concern expresses an anxiety that we found particularly instructive when considering how anyone learns to write in a new genre.

Relatedly, we received responses expressing concerns about the reduced amount of academic writing and the value of nonacademic genres. The Fall 2018 professor who was concerned about newspaper articles continued in their response, "I can't see any reason why any student would ever create an infographic." Infographics are, however, commonly assigned in business and technical writing courses at Seneca. When asked what changes should be made to the course, a minority of professors surveyed suggested more academic writing (16% of 24 Fall 2018 responses; 31% of 16 Winter 2019 responses; 31% of 16 Fall 2020 responses). Other responses connected reduced academic writing with a lack of rigor. For example, one Fall 2018 professor wrote, "I am seriously considered [sic] about the level of academic rigor in COM101. … I used to grade a 5-paragraph essay (completed in class) for the first assessment. Now we're being asked to assign paragraphs and blog posts. It is a betrayal of the students." One Fall 2020 response called for a more literary approach and connected skills transfer to a "dumbing-down of the previous course."

The comments reminded us of the diverse perspectives on the question of how to best teach writing, and the need for a collaborative approach to pedagogical change. To wit, one of the reasons we found it difficult to develop insights about COM101 based on the course addenda (or syllabi) is because, despite standardized course requirements around assessment types and having a mix of reading genres, professors' approaches to the course remained varied. First-year writing courses have a unique history as being driven by the expertise of the writing instructor, unlike the introductory courses in many other disciplines which share a set of common learning outcomes (Robertson & Taczak, 2018). Thus, curricular changes to first-year composition courses can provoke

conflict around who determines what is "best" for students in their writing skills development. Robertson & Taczak (2018) write that professors can be "'un-disciplined' in our continued hold on the past while we often ignore or are loathe to change according to the research that tells us what the future should hold for FYC [first-year composition courses] and the students in those Courses" (p. 197). We wondered if, in these cases, mastery of academic writing is fertile ground for negative transfer. As previously noted, negative transfer can occur when learned conventions become ingrained as inflexible rules (Gorzelsky et. al, 2016; Hill, 2016), or when writers resist seeing the connections between former and new learning, a form of resistance transfer (Roberston, Taczak & Yancey, 2012; Taczak, 2022). Professors' mastery in the domain of academic writing might interfere with recognizing the value of writing in other domains.

Professor and Student Data in Conversation

Professor anxieties may indicate they struggle to see the value of writing skills transfer whereas students do not. This may be an opportunity for faculty to learn new writing approaches alongside and with students, as the call for a more academic focus in professor responses was not matched in student responses. Students identified the academic essay and associated skills as useful in their other courses, but when asked if anything should be added to the course, students largely answered no (73.8% of 439 respondents in 2018, 78.6% of 262 respondents in 2019, and 71.5% of 207 respondents in 2020). In their comments, very few of the respondents who answered yes mentioned adding more academic writing. This might not be surprising given the number of COM101 students enrolled in diploma programs that require more professional than academic writing (such as accounting, engineering, flight services, computer programming, nursing) and Seneca's focus on producing "career- and world-ready" graduates (Seneca Polytechnic, 2023). In this context, it is reasonable to consider there may be a disconnect between academically-trained professors and career-driven students in how they each approach writing.

Another area where professors might learn from student responses is the value of social media. One professor wrote, "Framing writing in a transfer context is useful … but I feel very silly docking marks when a student doesn't fake-tweet properly… I also think that it's far more likely that our students will be negatively judged in a professional context if they make errors in Standard English in business email than that they will be judged for making clumsy social media posts." Students, however, indicated a greater awareness of the usefulness of social media skills. In response to what could be added to the course, one 2020 student respondent wrote, "Maybe more examples of how

social media platforms are used in business." Another wrote, "We live in an online world and learning about letters and email. The internet is so much more. Communication has evolved so much more. There should be a code of ethics of what to say and what not to say. There should be stuff about social media. The course material was very outdated."

Conclusion

Based on our survey data from 2018-2020, students and professors' stated experiences of COM101 were largely encouraging. Students, both L1 and L2, articulated that COM101 had affected their writing positively and, more importantly, claimed that they were transferring their writing skills in significant ways inside and outside of school. Despite the significant learning curve, the newness of skills transfer, and the timing challenges of the roll-out, professors demonstrated a clear engagement with skills transfer pedagogy. In the few professors' comments of resistance, we found a valuable lesson around negative transfer: in learning to teach for skills transfer, our pedagogy and relationship with students may be strengthened by re-conceiving ourselves as novices as we also engage in new writing situations.

Transferring skills to a new genre requires a writer to become a novice again – which naturally produces anxiety, especially if the writer is also a professor who has to then teach and evaluate the new genre. This anxiety is also amplified in the context where mastery is anticipated as grounds for employment. Contract faculty are particularly vulnerable where they need to invest unpaid hours (often limited by needing to teach part-time at multiple post-secondary institutions) to learn a new approach for a course, while also navigating the looming threat of student satisfaction surveys and job precarity.

However, the anxiety we face as writing professors can give us insight into and a kinship with the anxiety our students face when confronted with a new rhetorical situation or genre. Moreover, our anxiety over non-mastery of transfer might help us to be better writing teachers because it can allow us to amplify our own process as learners. Having to learn the conventions of an infographic or blog requires us to actually engage in skills-transfer ourselves; we need to ask, as our students do, "Why is this written in this way? Who is this for? What is the aim?" This leads us to valuable questions about the writing process that we can share with our students: How did we learn to write in a new genre? What skills did we draw on? What new resources did we seek? In amplifying our own learning process as we transfer our writing skills, we are not teaching our students how to write in a specific genre, but rather, how to *learn* to write in new contexts. As educators teaching writing skills transfer,

we may also become "expert at learning writing skills in multiple social contexts rather than expert writers in a single context" (Beaufort, 2007, p. 8). In the end, as our students enter new, unknowable future worlds, it is the ability to learn that can be the most enduring skill.

Endnotes

1. At Seneca, a Fall Semester is September - December; a Winter Semester is January - April.
2. https://www.senecacollege.ca/mobilityresearch/CIRPA_Presentation_final.pdf
3. In "Table 2: Writing Genres Students Most Used In and Out of College" it appears that "essay" overtakes "email" as the dominant genre for students in school in 2020, which is a strange shift with all courses moving online during the pandemic. However, we believe this reflects a change in our survey language: in 2020, we replaced "academic essay" and "research essay" with "academic essays" and "research skills" after noticing that students were conflating the two essay types and, ever the educators, we sought to ensure students understood what they were selecting. We hypothesize this seeming increase in "essays" in 2020 is a result of our survey's inconsistent design rather than a shift in students' genre preference. Given the revised options, essays might have been the top answer in 2018 and 2019. Either way, emails and essays were consistently the top two genres selected by students as most relevant for in-school writing.
4. Notably, the qualitative responses we collected from this survey question for COM111 students (the enhanced version of COM101) in 2020 and 2021 indicated the same primary theme of students having prior learning or pre-existing skills: 25% of 59 responses in 2020 and 26% of 23 responses in 2021.

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Appendix A

COM101/111 Learning Outcomes

1. Summarize a variety of texts to demonstrate comprehension.
2. Compose written texts in academic, professional and public genres using communication strategies suitable for the intended purpose and audience.
3. Analyze a variety of texts to determine the credibility of those sources.
4. Create informed and researched arguments in response to a variety of texts.
5. Revise writing for clarity, coherence, and grammatical correctness.

Table 1: Professor Survey Questions 2018 - 2019

Taken at the beginning of the semester	PSQ1	In your own words, what is the objective of COM101?
	PSQ2	Why did you order your assessments the way you did on your addendum?
	PSQ3	What specific Transfer assessments have you selected for your section(s) of COM101 and why?
	PSQ4	How do you plan to include students' revisions in the course?
	PSQ5	Will you ask students to write reflections about their writing choices or skills development, graded or ungraded, in COM101? Please elaborate on your rationale.
Taken at the end of the semester	PSQ6	What activity did you find most helpful in teaching genre awareness or transfer?
	PSQ7	Please describe how your transfer assessment(s) allowed students to demonstrate an awareness of their writing choices.
	PSQ8	Based on your experience this term, please explain a change you would make in your delivery of COM101 and why.
	PSQ9	Based on your experience this term, what practical changes to the design of COM101 would improve future iterations of the course?
	PSQ10	What additions to the COM101 org site would help you teach COM101 in the future?

Table 2: Professor Survey Questions 2020

PSQ1	What do you believe are the objectives of COM101?
PSQ2	Which activity or assessment, if any, did you find most helpful in addressing the objectives of this course?

PSQ3	Which activity or assessments, if any, have helped students demonstrate an awareness of their writing choices in COM101?
PSQ4	What are some ways you scaffolded or sequenced your course design to help build students' skills before major assessments?
PSQ5	Are there any parts of the course that you feel students struggle with in particular, related to course content or online delivery?
PSQ6	Based on your experience this term, what practical changes to the content or delivery of COM101 would improve future iterations of the course?

Table 3: Student Survey Questions 2018-2019

Question Number	Quantitative (Closed) Questions		Qualitative (Open) Questions
SSQ1	Since you've taken COM101, is there any difference in the way you write?	Yes	Please give examples:
		No	
SSQ2	Identify ideas or skills from COM101 that you've used in your other courses at Seneca (Select all that apply):	Identifying my writing purpose	Tell us how you've used these skills in your other courses at Seneca:
		Adjusting my language and tone	
		Identifying my audience	
		Strategically using persuasive appeals (logic, emotion, credibility)	
		Understanding the expectation of a writing genre	
		Research Essay	

		Academic Essay	
		Infographics	
		Proposals	
		News Articles	
		Blogs	
		Social Media	
		Emails	
		Letters	
		Other:	
SSQ3	Identify ideas or skills from COM101 that you've used outside of school (Select all that apply):	Identifying my writing purpose	Tell us how you've used these skills outside of school:
		Adjusting my language and tone	
		Identifying my audience	
		Strategically using persuasive appeals (logic, emotion, credibility)	
		Understanding the expectation of a writing genre	

		Research Essay	
		Academic Essay	
		Infographics	
		Proposals	
		News Articles	
		Blogs	
		Social Media	

		Emails	
		Other:	
SSQ4	Is there anything we can do a better job of teaching?	Yes	Please give examples:
		No	
SSQ5	Is there anything in COM101 that we should include in the future?	Yes	Please give examples:
		No	

Table 4: Student Survey Questions 2020

Question #	Survey Question	Closed Option	Open Prompt Follow-Up

SSQ1	Since you've taken COM101/111, is there any difference in the way you write?	Yes	Please give examples.
		No	Please explain.
SSQ2	Do you use any of the ideas or skills from COM101/111 **in your other course(s) at Seneca**?	Yes	[SSQ2 part two triggered]
		No	Please explain.
SSQ2b	If yes: Identify ideas or skills from COM101/111 from the list below that you have used **in your other course(s) at Seneca**. Please select all that apply.	Identifying my writing purpose	Tell us how you've used these skills in your other courses at Seneca.
		Adjusting my language and tone	
		Identifying my audience	
		Strategically using persuasive appeals (logic, emotion, credibility)	
		Understanding the expectation of a writing genre	
		Research Skills	
		Academic Essay	
		Infographics	
		Proposals	
		News Articles	
		Blogs	
		Social Media	

		Correspondence (Letters, emails)	
		Other:	
SSQ3	Do you use any of the ideas or skills from COM101/111 **outside of school**? Please select all that apply.	Yes	[SSQ3 part two triggered]
		No	Please explain.
SSQ3b	If yes: Identify ideas or skills from COM101/111 from the list below that you have **used outside of school**. Please select all that apply.	Identifying my writing purpose	Tell us how you've used these skills outside of school.
		Adjusting my language and tone	
		Identifying my audience	
		Strategically using persuasive appeals (logic, emotion, credibility)	
		Understanding the expectation of a writing genre	
		Research Skills	
		Academic Essay	
		Infographics	
		Proposals	
		News Articles	
		Blogs	
		Social Media	

		Correspondence (Letters, emails)	
		Other:	
SSQ4	Due to the pandemic, COM101 was moved fully online. How did your professor organize the weekly lessons in COM101?	Only a weekly "live" class lecture with limited or no course content posted	[SSQ4 part two triggered]
		Course content was shared online with a weekly "live" class meeting	
		Course content was posted as videos and/or documents with no "live" class meetings	
SSQ4b	Did you find this course format helpful?	Yes	Please explain.
		No	Please explain.
SSQ5	Is there anything we can do a better job of teaching?	Yes	Please give examples.
		No	Please explain.
SSQ6	Is there anything missing in COM101/111 that we should include in the future?	Yes	Please give examples.
		No	Please explain.