

Pedagogical Approaches to the Instruction of Ethics in Lower-Level Undergraduate Professional

Writing Courses

By

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ABSTRACT

The following report centers on ethics instructional methods in undergraduate professional writing courses. The literature review covers the instructional practices favored by professors of upper-level and graduate professional writing courses, such as interspersing ethics throughout the semester and implementing service-learning projects. The primary research, however, focuses on the ethics instructional methods used in lower-level (freshman and sophomore) professional writing courses. This study's primary research consists of four instructor interviews and a content analysis of two professors' course materials. The courses featured in this study are East Carolina University's ENGL 2201: Writing about the Disciplines, ENGL 3040: Introduction to Professional Writing, and ENGL 3880: Writing for Business and Industry. Though many of the pedagogical approaches used in upper-level professional writing courses translated to those of lower-level courses, nuances emerged for the instruction of ethics when utilized with younger students. Following a discussion of these nuances, suggestions for ethics instructional practices for professors of lower-level professional writing courses and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: ethics, instructional methods, pedagogy, lower-level undergraduate writing courses

Pedagogical Approaches to the Instruction of Ethics in Lower-Level Undergraduate Professional
Writing Courses

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Introduction

My interest in the instruction of ethics began in a graduate-level ethics course in the summer of 2022. While reading about Kant, Aristotle, and other philosophers, I reflected on why I had made it to the latter half of a master's degree without the formal evaluation of ethics' role in professional writing. Certainly, there had been more discussion about ethics' role in writing during my graduate courses, and the fact that I was able to participate in an ethics writing course was proof that the program viewed ethics instruction as important. But I began to think back over my undergraduate career and wondered why this learning outcome hadn't been more central, especially considering the rhetorical devices taught in technical and professional communication (TPC) courses.

With my own experiences in mind, I began a literature review of texts that detailed previous and current methods being used for ethics instruction in professional writing courses. Practices such as service-learning (SL) projects and classroom discussions of ethics-related case studies reigned prominent among the recommendations. Researchers described their efforts and results in ethics instruction by discussing their pedagogical methods, describing glowing student-reflections of their own ethical growth, and listing the results of ethics- and morality-based standardized tests. These chronicles were invigorating, but I noticed one omission: none of the authors were discussing lower-level professional writing courses. Most detailed courses that served seniors and a few juniors. Many others analyzed graduate-level courses. This exclusion fueled my interest. I wondered if time constraints or some other obstacle in lower-level professional writing courses prevented instructors from including ethics as a part of their courses or if the current trend was to include ethics, but that professors were choosing not to conduct research or report their observations.

In order to better investigate these musings, I developed two research questions to guide my study:

1. What methods (frameworks, service-learning projects) are researcher-educators currently using in TPC courses to encourage ethical use of rhetorical devices and to what effect?
2. Are instructors of lower-level professional writing courses covering ethics in their courses, and if so, to what extent?

To answer these questions, I first conducted a literature review to better understand the current climate of ethics instruction in professional writing courses at all undergraduate and graduate levels. I then identified four professors of lower-level professional writing courses and conducted interviews with them about their instructional practices surrounding ethics. The courses—ENGL 2201, ENGL 3040, and ENGL 3880—are all required courses for East Carolina University's BS in Professional Writing and Informational Design program. Two of the four professors also agreed to share course documents with me—with one agreeing to allow me access to observe her online Canvas course for ENGL 2201.

The report that follows will detail my findings from the literature on recommended ethics-related instructional practices in professional writing courses, current ethics instruction in lower-level undergraduate professional writing courses as detailed by the professor-participants of this study, a content analysis of selected course materials from two of the four participants, suggestions for professors hoping to incorporate ethics in lower-level professional writing courses, and recommendations for future research on ethics instruction in lower-level professional writing courses.

Literature Review

Importance of Ethical Instruction in Professional Writing Courses

The rhetorical devices used in technical and professional writing make the genre and its instruction a minefield of ethical considerations. Bushneil (1999) and Dubinsky (2002) have discussed the pitfalls with courses and programs that focus entirely on the practical instruction of technical and professional writing without reference to the ethical implications of its practice. As an educator-turned-practitioner who then turned back to teaching, Bushneil elucidates a dangerous assumption about technical and professional writers engaging in “‘transmission view’ in which the writer is assumed to be an invisible transmitter of truth, a transparent conveyor of neutral, objective facts” (p. 179). This, of course, is not the case, as numerous researchers have pointed out the rhetorical devices and internal (conscious and unconscious) biases used in professional writing make the texts produced rife with undercurrents of persuasion.

Once brought to their attention, students also realize the ethical considerations that must take place when engaging in technical and professional writing, as many of the researchers pointed out. In her article on ethics, critical thinking, and communications pedagogy, Donna Kienzler (2001) detailed a SL project in which students were asked to write letters to parents whose children were attending a middle school in the process of adopting a new math program. During the assignment, Kienzler’s graduate students described their concern that their training in professional writing might be used to advocate for an unworthy cause (p. 322). In another example, Bushneil’s (1999) students acknowledged the difficulty of creating “bias-free surveys,” during a classroom exercise. In the end, the feat was deemed impossible by the students but “illuminating” (p. 182). Finally, during her analysis of student reflections, Chen (2021) noticed her students describing the difficulty of warding off biases. Of the 49 student reflections coded, Chen found that 23 mentioned the need to “understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and *power* including social, cultural, historical, and economic issues related to

information, writing, and technology” (p. 121, emphasis added). Though these researchers understand the power and responsibility associated with technical and professional writing, based on these student responses, it seems that this concept isn’t missed by students either—especially once professors take the time to address these matters explicitly. But on this issue of instructional time and whether a comprehensive discussion of ethics should be allowed to absorb so much of that limited commodity, some researchers, such as Moore (1999), have pointed out the need to prepare TPC students more for the professional world.

Ethics Instruction: Stakeholder Desires in Writing Courses

As Moore (1999) and Spigelman and Grobman (2006) have pointed out, educational institutions as well as professors have a duty to students and future student employers in order to practically prepare learners for future professional work. Moore structures his argument by expounding that if technical communicators are not effective writers, they will never hold the jobs that affect change. He cites legal writers who crafted legislation that “reduced social oppressions and civil rights violations in many nations, and which have contributed to greater liberty, equality, and justice for more people in the world” (p. 222). This, Moore argues, is why there is a need to structure writing programs around the central goal of creating good writers. Spigelman and Grobman took a more equitable view when describing their challenges in creating a professional writing program. The authors detailed the need “to balance the concerns of rhetoric-ethical, intellectual, and pragmatic-in [the] development of the program’s structure, course offerings, and course content” (p. 49). All three authors—Moore, Spigelman, and Grobman—call for the practical instruction of writing, just in different dilutions with other outcomes. Researchers such as Bushneil (1999) and Dubinsky (2002) go even further—warning of the dangers of focusing too heavily on practical skills development. Both authors question how students and prospective employers might divert from a fixation on practical skills instruction in an effort to create more well-rounded employees and increase benefits for future

employers—even while consuming precious instructional time for ethical—rather than practical--skills development.

Dubinsky (2002) recognized that students have a particular focus when they pursue a four-year degree: that of future employability. So, he sought to balance the need for practical and ethical instruction by incorporating SL projects into his curriculum. Dubinsky noted how this balance could encourage student engagement in different learning outcomes: “I ‘sold’ [service-learning projects] to students by emphasizing the practical (instrumental) advantages and added that they would learn to help others” (p. 68). Though he emphasized the practical skills development to his students, Dubinsky primarily utilized SL projects in an effort to increase the ethical awareness of his learners. Dubinsky details the struggles he faced through two iterations of his SL professional writing course in trying to increase student engagement by emphasizing practical skills development outwardly to his students while simultaneously promoting ethical considerations in learners. In the end, he found that his course materials needed to be adjusted in order to support ethical awareness (a topic covered more comprehensively later in this section), but still noted the need to address the practical learning outcomes with his students in an effort to increase engagement. And though student engagement is very important during course planning, they are not the only stakeholders’ educators must consider when developing course goals.

Bushneil (1999) specifically recognized that academia is mostly concerned with ethics instruction only as far as students being able to make the minimum ethical decisions required once in the workforce. He continued his discussion by stating that, “the emphasis is not on questioning, critiquing, and perhaps changing entire paradigms; rather, it is on how to adopt them even more efficiently, in order to speed the transition from student-initiate to contributing professional” (p. 179). Bushneil is noting the difficulty of separating the academy from industry needs and of individuals making unbiased decisions once in a professional environment—for it is far easier to align oneself with the goals of the company. He and Dubinsky (2002) argue that

professors and academic institutions should be wary of instructing students to be lightning rods, merely conducting information from employers to audience. Bushneil suggests that students and industry benefit from pedagogical approaches that teach students to think for themselves rather than by following rules. He states that independent thinkers produce more efficient processes and that “it is through contraries, through the friction that results from difference, that we progress” (p.184). Bushneil is suggesting that the TPC workforce needs more critical thinkers for the sake of progress and ethical-decision making; that this has the dual advantage of benefitting the student and the industry. The literature expounded on this assertion, providing examples of professors and writing program developers deliberating on how to produce these kinds of learning outcomes for their students.

Ethics Instruction: Critical Thinking and Service Learning

Throughout the literature on ethics instruction in college-level writing courses, two predominant recommendations emerged: critical thinking instruction and service-learning projects. Professor-researchers found that the implementation of these two strategies aided students in their awareness and consideration of ethical issues—especially when each strategy was explicitly connected with ethical or civic considerations. There were four overlapping subcategories that researchers also considered when incorporating these methods into their curricula: ethics-focused course materials, diverse perspective inclusion, reflection assignments, and an interspersing of ethics instruction. There were slight nuances when utilizing each subcategory with critical-thinking learning outcomes and service-learning projects, however many of the researcher recommendations are constant, or at the very least, complimentary.

Critical Thinking

A majority of the literature reviewed noted a need to encourage critical thinking in TPC courses in order to produce more efficient and ethical employees (Boss, 1994; Bushneil, 1999;

Chen, 2021; Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Dubinsky, 2002; Hartung, 1998; Hedberg, 2017; Kienzler, 2001; Micciche, 2005; Moore, 1999; Ross, 2021; Spigelman & Grobman, 2006). It is important to consider how critical thinking overlaps with ethics and the expansion of ethical thinkers. Ross (2021) notes the distinction between ethics (an individual's code of conduct) and morality (society's generally accepted code of conduct). The literature suggests that because of ethics subjectability, the development of critical thinking in students becomes all the more crucial. For it is critical thinking that leads to the development of ethical considerations and decisions. Because of this, professor-researchers have considered a variety of options to induce this cognitive approach.

Questioning the Status Quo. Bushneil (1999) and Kienzler (2001) both discuss the necessity for students to question traditional modes of operation in order to increase critical thinking among learners. Bushneil states: "In the university, the mission is (or should be) to teach critical thinking, to encourage our students to be skeptics and to question what they perceive as 'authorities' (including us) both inside and outside the academy" (p. 184). Bushneil encourages his class to question the "unbiased" nature of technical and scientific writing by reviewing technical documents and attempting to develop unbiased surveys. Bushneil also notes that he spends a great deal of time encouraging students to "shape knowledge" rather than passing information from one source to another in a clear and concise fashion (p. 185). He instructs students to gather their own information and form hypotheses then test those hypotheses. Bushneil suggests that this art of questioning increases independent thinking in students, helping them to analyze and adapt to a diverse range of problems and situations (p. 185).

Kienzler (2001) likewise had students question their authorities. While working on a whole-class SL project, graduate students were asked to compose technical documents for

parents of middle-schoolers. The documents were intended to explain a new and controversial math program being implemented at the school. Though the school's administration was the students' "client," students were still encouraged to question the advisability of the math program. Throughout the semester, the graduate students sought their own information regarding the effectiveness of the new math program, rather than ceding to the administration's assurances. Students also took care to analyze their own behavior in regards to the project. For example, teachers within the school wanted to provide the students with a meal for all their hard, unpaid work on the documents. However, students refused to eat in the presence of the teachers for fear that this would be considered an attempt to "influence" their conduct (p. 334).

By encouraging students to question the status quo, even on small things like a free meal, Kienzler and Bushnell (1999) are ensuring that students analyze and question authorities' behavior and understanding as well as their own. This questioning, or analyzing, can also be seen in the development and consideration of ethical codes.

Codes of Ethics. In an effort to increase students' critical thinking about ethics, Driver and Hoffman (2022) and Ross (2021) implemented personal and classroom ethical codes into their courses. The ability to reflect on which tenets are important for ethical codes forces students to think critically about their own values and needs when operating in professional environments, and it requires a certain amount of forethought and consideration. Throughout the process, students have to analyze, justify, and think critically about their own ethical practices—leading to more practice with critical thinking and more effective considerations of practices they might not have questioned otherwise.

In Ross' (2021) courses, students were encouraged to create an ethical code for the class to abide by when engaging in difficult ethical discussions or dilemmas (pp. 82-83). Ross notes that a major benefit of students creating their own classroom code of ethics means that

they are more likely to adhere to these principles because the students themselves developed them. As the students developed these codes together, there seems to be a unifying aspect to their creation, and likely a more ferocious acceptance of these principles.

Driver and Hoffman (2022) took a slightly different approach. They had students develop their own personal, individual codes of ethics, and asked students to provide examples of how each learner adhered to their principles (pp. 195-196). Unlike Ross' courses, students didn't engage in a classroom discussion prior to the ethical codes' creation, so there was no opportunity for classmate input during the development phase. However students did present their ethical principles through a class presentation—giving students glimpses into each others' ethical reasoning. Driver and Hoffman noted the emotional responses created by the presentations, with students crying and laughing as they recounted their personal ethical views to the class (p. 195).

Though the literature reviewed only highlights two examples of creating ethical codes, there are other researchers who call for these types of assignments to be implemented in order to increase ethical considerations among learners. Dubinsky (2002), for example, did not have his class create ethical codes, but he is a strong proponent of centering class discussions and materials around ethical considerations. This one assignment incorporates many of the methods cited by researchers for promoting ethical growth, such as practicing critical thinking and offering a multiplicity of perspectives.

Service-Learning Projects

SL projects are a favored instructional technique by educators hoping to induce ethical growth in their students (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Boss, 1994; Brandes & Randall, 2011; Dubinsky, 2002; Gorman et al., 1994; Kienzler, 2001). Instructors often favor this approach because it aligns with many of the learning outcomes considered desirable by those hoping to

promote ethical thought. Through their problem-based nature, SL projects naturally promote critical and innovative thinking in students and just as naturally offer a multiplicity of perspectives within and outside of academia. Students are also more receptive to these types of projects, considering them worthwhile as a way to develop professional skills, which leads to more engagement in the work (Dubinsky, 2002).

Though many educators are enthusiastic about these projects, the research linking student ethical growth to SL projects is mixed. Bernacki and Jaeger (2008) and Brandes and Randall (2011) found, through the use of pre- and post-standardized testing, that there was no ethical growth in students upon completion of a semester-long SL project. Bernacki and Jaeger used the Defining Issues Test (DIT) and the Moral Justification Scale (MJS) to gauge the ethical responses in 46 students across three subjects: English, philosophy, and sociology. The students were sectioned into two groups: 25 were in a course with an SL component, while the other 21 were in courses not containing SL. The standardized tests showed no additional growth for the students completing the SL projects; however students were also asked to reflect on their experiences throughout the semester, and on this component of the study, students in the SL group overwhelmingly mentioned their abilities to react ethically and have a positive impact on the world (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008, p. 11).

Though Brandes and Randall (2011) used pre- and post-semester standardized tests just like Bernacki and Jaeger (2008), Brandes and Randall did utilize different tests: the Civic Attitudes Scale and the Civic Action Scale. Their sample size was smaller (34 undergraduate students) and they didn't have a control group in the form of students not taking an SL course. However, their results were much the same as Bernacki and Jaeger's. Students didn't show a significant growth on the standardized tests, but students did provide interesting insights on the one open-ended question included in the study. Participants were asked about the personal

benefits provided to them by the completion of the SL project. Of the 34 questioned, 28 focused on their ethical and civic growth due to the project (Brandes & Randall, 2011, p. 28). In both studies that used standardized testing, all of the authors acknowledged the need for more testing with larger sample sizes and more longitudinal data. The authors also seemed optimistic about students' responses to the qualitative portions of each study. In both Discussion sections of each study, the authors indicated that the students' discussion of ethical growth in the qualitative responses could herald future ethical advancement.

Though Bernacki and Jaeger (2008) and Brandes and Randall (2011) found discouraging results on their standardized tests, Boss (1994) reported a different outcome. By using the DIT (just like Bernacki and Jaeger) and two groups of students (one participating in SL and one not), Boss found that the students who participated in SL projects made significant gains on their post-semester DIT tests when compared to those who did not participate in SL. The mean gain for the SL students from pre- to post-test was 8.61, while the mean gain for students not participating in SL was 1.74 (Boss, 1994, p. 188). These results are illuminating and beg for an explanation of the discrepancy between Boss' results and Bernacki and Jaeger and Brandes and Randall's.

One possibility suggested by Bernacki and Jaeger (2008) is the focus of the courses (p. 7). Boss' student-participants were in an ethics course, whereas the other studies dealt with a variety of different subjects. Other researchers, such as Dubinsky (2002), Kienzler (2001), and Ross (2021), have also noted the need for professors to focus discussions, reflection essays, and materials around ethical considerations in order to equip students with the greatest chance of ethical advancement.

Methods and Low-Scale Assignments Promoting Ethical Growth through Critical-Thinking Development and Larger Service-Learning Projects

Ethically-Centered Course Materials. In the literature reviewed, many instructors opted to incorporate course materials encouraging ethical growth outright or, barring that, one of the more obscure learning outcomes that have been shown to promote ethical growth, such as critical thinking or a multiplicity of voices (Bushneil, 1999; Dubinsky, 2002; Kienzler, 2001; Ross, 2021; Spigelman & Grobman, 2006). One such researcher, Dubinsky (2002), reconsidered how he was addressing ethical subject matter after reviewing end-of-semester student comments on the first iteration of his SL course. He contemplated why his learners were so focused on the practical, or employable, aspects of his course, even though he acknowledged using this facet of SL to “sell” the students on the projects. On the second iteration of the course, he sought to shift the students’ focus by updating his course documents. Dubinsky edited his syllabus so that the course goals stressed the community engagement aspect of the SL project rather than the potential professional benefits. Though students still mentioned the practical benefits of the project after he’d updated the language used on the syllabus, Dubinsky noted a 60% increase in students mentioning their contributions to the community in post-course evaluations (p. 67). This shift in the student comments on course evaluations encouraged Dubinsky, though this was not the only change he made to the course. In addition to updating the language used on the syllabus, Dubinsky also incorporated course readings that he believed would shift students’ focus from the practical to ethical—a strategy used by many researchers.

In his effort to challenge traditional paradigms, Bushneil (1999) had students analyze instructional manuals and brochures on teenage sexuality. Bushneil framed the course discussion around ethical issues that might be present in the materials. For instance, students noticed that the brochure claiming to focus on teenage sexuality was predominantly about teen

pregnancy and presented a negative spin on a normal facet of growing up (pp. 182-183). In having learners analyze these materials, Bushneil suggests that he was able to illustrate the unbiased nature of writing—even that of technical and scientific writing (p. 183). Bushneil also used the assignment to help develop learners' critical thinking skills, asking the class to discuss how they would change the brochure in order to make it more objective.

Bushneil's (1999) decision to incorporate an assignment that had students focus on materials outside a standard textbook might be rooted in more than critical-thinking development. In his article, Bushneil lamented that when it comes to TPC textbooks he didn't "see activist technical writing pedagogy all that much in evidence" (p. 181). Bushneil notes that textbooks generally focus on the practical development of skills in an effort to "adopt [professional paradigms] even more efficiently, in order to speed the transition from student-initiate to contributing professional" (pp. 178-179). Though Bushneil is pointing out many TPC textbooks' emphasis on practical skills development in favor of ethics discussions, Hartung (1998) identified issues within textbooks even when the subject of ethics is broached. Hartung states that TPC textbook authors "should also treat moral principles, not as objective and self-evident statements of fact, but as evaluative assumptions whose truth values and meaning are both tentative and lacking universal agreement" (p. 363). Here, Hartung is pointing to the necessity of individuals to think critically about their own ethical choices, a learning outcome that other researchers have noted to be of substantial importance (Bushneil, 1999; Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Kienzler, 2001; Ross, 2021). When considering the need for students to develop their own ethical thought processes, instructors seem to be stitching their materials together rather than relying on a textbook for these learning opportunities. In her article, "Ethics, Critical Thinking, and Professional Communication Pedagogy," Kienzler (2001) lists several articles that could be used to engage students in ethical considerations (p. 320). And this

reflects instructors' increasing penchant to forgo textbooks altogether when incorporating ethical discussions into their curricula. Researchers appear to be stitching together their own individual course materials as a way to ingrain ethics and other pertinent learning outcomes throughout the course—a subject covered later on in this section.

Diverse Perspectives. Course materials can be a very effective way to present diverse perspectives to students, but there are also additional ways to incorporate this valuable learning outcome. According to researchers, diverse perspectives aid students in the development of critical thinking, ethical considerations, and more effective communication skills (Chen, 2021; Kienzler, 2001; Markel, 1997; Spigelman & Grobman, 2006). When considering ethical benefits, allowing students to interact with diverse opinions aids in a comprehensive understanding of complicated issues. Outside of ethical considerations, students are also exposed to a very real-world experience when they have to consider a multiplicity of voices.

After examining her students' reflection writings, Chen (2021) noted how many of her students found peer review beneficial in developing their writing for multiple audiences (p. 122). Chen states that this is a good practice for students offering them “more authentic situations for composing where students would interact with a suitable audience” (p. 123). Though this specific realization has more to do with the practical uses of diverse opinions, this interaction with multiple perspectives reinforces the need for a multiplicity of perspectives when making rhetorical decisions.

Kienzler (2001), likewise, recognized the practical struggles of her students in their SL project as they had to balance the requests of multiple stakeholders. During classroom discussions, students noted the difficulty they felt in balancing the needs of the school's administration, the skeptical parents, and their own worries that their rhetorical expertise would be used in an unethical manner (Kienzler, 2001, pp. 331-332). This exposure to multiple

appeals helped the students realize that they needed an additional perspective in the form of empirical research. Kienzler acknowledged that this need for an objective opinion through outside research signaled a growth in critical thinking and ethical reasoning through the use and consideration of diverse opinions (p. 335).

Like Kienzler's (2001) students, Markel (1997) also recognized the need for diverse opinions. Markel explained why writers should engage with diverse perspectives when crafting a document, stating, "[...] collaboration in thinking through an ethics problem will help you see shortcomings in your reasoning, as well as help you understand perspectives you might not have considered otherwise" (p. 293). Markel's comment is interesting, because he seems to be noting a connection between diverse perspectives and critical-thinking development, implying that one fosters the other. Markel then elucidates that creating this atmosphere of open communication and presenting and hearing diverse perspectives is important because, "they set the tone for the deliberative process; they create an atmosphere in which people treat one another—and, by extension, their views—respectfully" (p. 293). The researchers are presenting a solid argument that ethical growth stems from being able to view multiple perspectives of an issue. Learners who are able to understand the effects of rhetoric not only in their writing, but for the people using their writing, creates a more ethical thought process in students.

And though Markel (1997) is arguing for this diverse-perspectives approach, he notes that in most situations this is "unattainable" (p. 293). Kienzler's (2001) students likewise noted the time constraints involved in seeking out multiple opinions on an issue (p. 332). Though Markel and Kienzler note the difficulties in locating diverse perspectives and carving out time to consider them, they argue that the process should still be practiced while learners are in an academic setting. The authors suggest that making students aware of other perspectives will

make them more likely to consider alternative viewpoints and less likely to harbor a singular view when deliberating complicated issues—even when there isn't time for outside guidance.

Spigelman and Grobman (2006) also recognized this need for diverse perspectives and set out to implement this competency on a larger scale. While establishing a professional writing program, the authors noted the need for students to consider a broad range of voices, “to promote practical and *responsible* workplace communication” (p. 49, emphasis added). The authors created a professional writing program that would introduce learners to diverse perspectives from the beginning in an effort to create more ethically-conscious writers.

Kienzler (2001), Markel (1997), and Spigelman and Grobman (2006) present valuable recommendations about the usefulness of exposing professional writing students to a wide range of perspectives. The authors draw meaningful connections between the powerful instruction of rhetorical devices and the need to instruct students on how to use these tools ethically.

Student Reflection. In an effort to analyze ethical choices and behavior, many researchers note the benefits of ethical reflection for students (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Chen, 2021; Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Dubinsky, 2002; Hedberg, 2017). Reflection often takes the form of journaling, but many authors acknowledge the benefits of group reflection, as this provides an opportunity for students to consider ethical decisions as a group and gives students another opportunity to interact with multiple perspectives (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Chen, 2021; Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Hedberg, 2017).

Hedberg (2017) notes the benefits of collective reflection, stating, “[w]ith reflexive conversations about critical incidents, done in pairs, students gain broader perspective and social understanding, and can challenge critical assumptions” (p. 524). Here, Hedberg is pinpointing a few key tenets of effective classroom reflection practices, such as focusing on a

critical incident, incorporating diverse perspectives through group discussion, and encouraging a challenging of the status quo. All of these tenets are supported by the research as promoting ethical growth, so this one inclusion of a reflection assignment aids professors in incorporating multiple facets of ethical development (Bushneil, 1999; Chen, 2021; Kienzler, 2001; Markel, 1997; Spigelman & Grobman, 2006).

Bernacki and Jaeger (2008), likewise, implemented group reflection over the course of their SL project. Their collective reflection times took the form of “reflection dinners” in which students gathered for a meal and discussed the project and any ethical implications of the work (p. 9). Though these reflections were useful for the students, Bernacki and Jaeger point to additional benefits as well. They acknowledged that the students’ reflections helped them “observe *how* reasoning changes over time, and what critical events spur reasoning to become principled, justice-oriented, or care-oriented” (p. 14, emphasis in original). Dubinsky (2002) also found student reflections to be personally helpful when reimagining his SL project. By changing his course materials and centering classroom discussions around ethical issues, Dubinsky witnessed an increase in students discussing the ethical components of the project rather than their professional gains. Outside of providing benefits for students, analysis of these student materials seems to aid professor-researchers in honing their courses to include the most effective ethical learning aspects.

Researchers also note that reflections shouldn’t be entirely collective (Chen, 2021; Dubinsky, 2002; Hedberg, 2017). Micciche (2005) has recognized the role emotions play in ethical decision-making, “[t]here is a sense of uncompromising urgency expressed through the imperative, tying definitive action to an emotional-ethical appeal” (p. 173). Understanding this connection, Hedberg (2017) endorses the role individual reflection can play in order for students to recognize their emotional connections to ethical decisions:

Students can look for the subtle influence of cognitive biases (Raelin, 2002) or how their emotions affect their behavior (Jennings et al., 2015). They can gain skills in being aware of how feelings of confusion or vulnerability may be essential signals that they face a moral issue (Sekerka et al., 2009). (p. 522)

Researchers have also noted that students need to be directed in order to get the most ethical growth out of these assignments. Chen (2021) and Hedberg both recommend using directive questions that focus on ethical components in student reflections rather than permitting students to solely free-write (Chen, 2021, p. 120; Hedberg, 2017, pp. 522-523). Using directive questions in an individual setting can help students be prepared for classroom discussions. By using individual and collective reflection in tandem, students are able to process these considerations on their own, then witness other perspectives in the classroom—boosting ethical learning outcomes.

Interspersing Ethics Instruction. The majority of the literature reviewed points to the need for ethics to be interspersed throughout the course and materials rather than given a specific section or timeframe (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Boss, 1994; Brandes & Randall, 2011; Bushneil, 1999; Chen, 2021; Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Dubinsky, 2002; Kienzler, 2001; Ross, 2021; Spigelman & Grobman, 2006). Though the examination of methods advocated by the literature, ethics instruction has many overlapping tenets and practices. For instance, Kienzler (2001) notes that “[p]erhaps the biggest advantage of the critical thinking environment is that its ethics permeate the entire course, not just a discrete unit on ethics” (p. 336). Here, Kienzler is referring specifically to critical-thinking development. But other authors described how they interspersed these tenets throughout their courses rather than siloing ethics discussions, as can be seen in the previous sections on reflection, diverse perspectives and course materials.

Spigelman and Grobman (2006) went even further. The researchers sought to permeate ethics throughout an entire four-year professional writing program, noting that they, “planned courses in which students could build not only their professional portfolios but also an awareness of the heavily contested issues that surround the writing and reading of texts” (p. 55). Because of this driving resolution, Spigelman and Grobman didn’t simply include a general course on ethics, but set out to include critical engagement with a variety of ethical issues in many of the professional writing theory courses. During such courses, students would engage with prominent ethical dilemmas—considering their own reactions to those issues presented through reflection papers while engaging with a multiplicity of perspectives through classroom discussions and diverse reading selections.

By interspersing ethics discussions throughout writing courses and entire programs, researchers are suggesting that this is the best way to promote ethical learning outcomes in their student populations.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed points to several aspects that could be included in professional writing courses for ethical growth in students: critical thinking development, SL projects, ethical course materials, diverse perspective exposure, reflection opportunities, and ethics permeation throughout courses and programs. Though these pedagogical aspects seem promising, much of the literature focused on upper-level undergraduate and graduate professional writing courses. And while the literature gives readers a good understanding of specific pedagogical frameworks that could be utilized to encourage student ethical development, I must consider how (and if) these frameworks would translate to freshman and sophomore professional writing courses.

Methodology

Research Rationale

After conducting the literature review, learning more about ethics instructional practices, and noting the lack of research reported from lower-level undergraduate professional writing courses, I considered potential reasons for this void in research and identified three possible explanations:

1. Instructors were choosing not to cover ethics in lower-level professional writing courses due to the students' ages or time constraints
2. Instructors were covering ethical issues in lower-level professional writing courses, but not extensively enough to warrant research
3. Instructors were covering ethics in lower-level professional writing courses, but choosing not to conduct research or report on their findings

The latter of these reasons is of particular interest, because if instructors are teaching ethical considerations in their lower-level courses, there needs to be more literature on the nuances of ethics instruction when working with young learners.

Setting, Course Selection, and Participants

In order to determine the breadth of ethics instruction being featured in lower-level professional writing courses, I decided to focus my research on East Carolina University's (ECU) Bachelor of Science (BS) in Professional Writing and Informational Design (PWID) program. I chose this course track primarily because of my familiarity with the institution, but also because courses in the PWID program are likely to include instruction in rhetorical devices used by professional writers (even if these lower-level courses have a diverse mixture of student majors). Additionally, the PWID program is relatively new, only becoming available for students in the 2020/2021 academic year. By considering a program whose learning outcomes and emphases had so recently been developed, I sought to understand the priorities of the

curriculum considered by the faculty who developed the program and analyze how instructors were adhering to or overlooking these standards.

To gain this understanding, I interviewed four professors of lower-level professional writing courses required for completion of the BS in PWID and emailed the director of the program, Dr. Donna Kain. The selected courses consisted of ENGL 2201: Writing about the Disciplines, ENGL 3040: Introduction to Professional Writing, and ENGL 3880: Writing for Business and Industry. These lower-level courses predate the PWID program itself, however, I determined their inclusion in the required course list of the program suggestive of their learning outcomes. I should note that ENGL 3880 is an optional course in the program. It is one of three courses that students can choose to complete out of a list of 12 in order to meet the requirements for the PWID degree (“Professional Writing”). I should also note that ENGL 2201 is a required prerequisite to ENGL 3040, so this course isn’t formally on the required course list. But, because students need this course in order to complete ENGL 3040 (a course that *is* required for completion of the PWID degree) and because this course generally serves lower-level students, I felt compelled to include it in my research. Readers may recognize some debate over whether ENGL 2201: Writing about the Disciplines is in fact a professional writing course. Because of this, I read the course description to the two professors of 2201 during each interview. For reference, the description states: “Instruction in research-based writing in the context of academic disciplines. Emphasis on analytical and argumentative writing skills for university, professional, and civic life” (“Professional Writing,” n.d.). Both professors considered 2201 a professional writing course, even if it’s an introductory one. Sarah, one of the 2201 professors, noted that 2201 was one of the first times students got to “dip their toe” into the professional writing genre (*Sarah*, personal communication, August 21, 2023). She commented on the fact that by writing about their fields or disciplines, students were required to research genre specifics and emulate those practices. Taylor, the other 2201 professor-interviewee, agreed, citing the same reasoning. Taylor observed the move toward having students focus on

disciplinary writing put the course in the professional writing category. The other two courses included in this study, ENGL 3040: Introduction to Professional Writing and ENGL 3880: Writing for Business and Industry, are generally considered more straightforward professional writing courses, though they are still early on in the program's curriculum garnering students with lower class standings.

The four interviewees consisted of one graduate teaching assistant (ENGL 3880), one faculty instructor (ENGL 2201), one tenure-track professor (ENGL 3040), and one tenured professor (ENGL 2201). All interviewees had prior experience teaching writing courses when the interviews were conducted. Three of the educators had experience implementing service-learning projects into their curriculum, though only one professor was still using service-learning projects, while another was planning to reimplement these projects into her courses in the near future.

Methods

Prior to conducting this research, I received approval from ECU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and obtained informed consent from each of the participants. Participants were contacted via email and asked to participate in a 25-30-minute interview about their ethics instruction practices. Participants were made aware that they had been selected based on their instruction of ENGL 2201, 3040, or 3880. All of the initial professors contacted agreed to participate.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, then the recordings deleted per IRB-approval adherence. Participants were informed of this process and were assured that their names would remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. Interview subject matter focused on the educators' ethics instructional methods and their views on implementing these methods in lower-level writing courses.

In addition to conducting four interviews, I also performed a content analysis on relevant course materials—syllabi, relevant course communication, and ethics-related assignments and guidelines—from two of the four participants. I considered not using such a small sample of course materials but found the communication from professors to students provided useful and colorful context to the conversations I had with the professors. The following terms were used during the content analysis: ethic(s)(al), critical(ly) [in reference to thinking, evaluating, or analyzing], and civic/social/justice. Additionally, I looked for the following ideas while analyzing the course materials:

- learning outcomes and course procedures that promoted critical thinking
- verbiage that encouraged or assignments that exposed students to diverse perspectives
- assignments that promoted reflection.

These ideas, such as critical thinking, a multiplicity of voices, and reflection were all emphasized in the research on ethics instruction. Because of this, I wanted to observe whether instructors in my study group were also utilizing these concepts in an effort to promote ethical awareness in students.

My hope is that these case studies present a better understanding of whether professors of lower-level professional writing courses are consciously incorporating ethics instruction for their younger students and how pervasive these practices are.

Findings and Discussion

Importance of Ethics Instruction in Lower-Level Professional Writing Courses

For each of the interviews, I began with a simple question regarding the professors' thoughts on the importance of ethics instruction in their specific courses (2201, 3040, and 3880). I wanted to gauge whether the professors considered ethics instruction useful to students who had two to four more years of study prior to entering the workforce. Every professor interviewed agreed that the inclusion of ethics instruction, even in lower-level professional writing courses was important. "I don't know how to talk about writing without talking about ethical issues," was Alex's simple response to this question (*Alex*, personal communication, August 25, 2023). Betty, an ENGL 3880 professor, likewise noted her reasoning for discussing ethics with her younger students, "[rhetoric] is such a powerful tool. We are going to teach [students] how to wield these tools" (*Betty*, personal communication, August 25, 2023). Taylor, a 2201 professor, was very direct with students in one of her course documents on the need for ethics considerations in professional writing, stating, "[n]on-biased reporting does not exist. Every writer, reporter, or human being has a point of view and perspective and puts 'the facts' into a picture or context that makes sense to her or him" (*Taylor*, 2023a). Taylor's guidance in this course document is necessary, but not new. Bushneil (1999) also discussed the "transmission view" that is the assumed standard of professional writing. By acknowledging that this type of writing does not exist, these researchers and professors are creating more ethically conscious writers. Stating that writers always have an agenda or a context for what they are writing helps the students understand that biased writing is not necessarily intentionally misleading, but rather something that writers have to consciously combat.

Based on their interview responses and course documents, these professors clearly see a need for ethics instruction, though Alex did note the difficulty of discussing ethics in the workplace with this age group, "[...] sometimes that's [ethical discussions] really abstract for 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds" (*Alex*, personal communication, August, 25, 2023). This sentiment makes

sense. Students in lower class standings often aren't completely certain of their future career field, so initiating conversations surrounding ethics concepts they won't use for several years is made even more difficult by the theoretical nature of such conversations. So, professors who want to incorporate ethics in lower-level professional writing courses are left with the problem of creating student engagement in ethics-related discussions. During the interviews and through the course documents they shared, the educators were very forthcoming on the methods they use to generate this engagement.

Content Analysis

Though I didn't have access to all the interviewees' course materials, I did have access to Taylor's full 2201 online Canvas course and Betty's 3880 syllabus and an ethics-related assignment guideline document she shared with me. Using these materials in conjunction with the interviews provided me with a better understanding of ethics instruction in these courses. For instance, while looking through the syllabi, general descriptions were given more context through the content of the interviews. Knowing the instruction these generalities alluded to, aided my understanding of the breadth of ethics instruction taking place in these courses. I completed a formal quantitative evaluation of certain ideas and themes present on each professors' syllabus, which can be found in Table 1 below, in order to illustrate the pervasiveness of ethics-related instructional methods touted in the literature. Keeping a formal count on ethics-related verbiage on assignment guidelines and course procedures wasn't as illuminating, so I've included these findings with context in the discussion section below.

Additionally, the focus of the discussion below is primarily on the documents themselves (though some interview responses are included) used within these courses that couldn't be easily compartmentalized into one of the peripheral learning outcomes, such as critical thinking and diverse perspectives. There will be further discussion on these tangential outcomes later on in the report.

Table 1

Syllabi Content Analysis

Pseudonym Course	Terms and concepts	Number of references
Betty ENGL 3880	Ethic(s)(al)	2
	Critical(ly) [in reference to thinking, evaluating, or analyzing]	3
	Civic/social/justice	1
	Diverse perspectives	1
	Reflection	2
Taylor ENGL 2201	Ethic(s)(al)	0
	Critical(ly) [in reference to thinking, evaluating, or analyzing]	3
	Civic/social/justice	1
	Diverse perspectives (concept)	1
	Reflection (concept)	3

Course Materials and Procedures Discussion

Syllabi. From the perspective of a quantitative content analysis, ethics and civic concepts are only mentioned three times across the two syllabi. However, there are numerous examples on each sample where the professors signal that they will be incorporating ethics instructional practices into these courses. Betty's 3880 course description elucidates the need for ethics considerations in professional writing, stating that the course will focus on,

[...] resisting the accepted notion that business and technical communication is neutral and objective both in its composition and in its impact. Instead, we will expose and explore the influence of bias in business and industry communication and consider ways of thinking that helps us overcome those biases which inhibit justice, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. (2023a, p. 1)

Additionally, both syllabi include a writing intensive course description. This description, standardized in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at ECU, states that upon completing the course, students will be able to: "[u]se writing to investigate complex, relevant topics and address significant questions through engagement with and effective use of credible sources" (Betty, 2023a, p. 5; Taylor, 2023b; p. 1). "Complex, relevant topics," as I found in my interviews with the professors, often include those of ethical considerations—especially those relating to the students' disciplines.

But there is additional evidence of instructional methods that, according to the literature, promote ethical growth. For instance, across the two syllabi, there are five references to student reflection. During a description of a self-reflective essay assignment, Taylor's 2201 syllabus asks students to discuss, "changes, shifts, themes, recurrent ideas, accomplishments, [and] other discoveries" in their writing in addition to discussing their, "evolving identity as a writer, [their] understanding of [the] writing process, [and their] future as a writer" (Taylor, 2023b, p. 5). Though these reflection guidelines don't mention ethics explicitly, they give the student an opportunity to organically reflect on any ethical growth they might have experienced.

In addition to allowing students to deliberate ethical issues individually, the professors also present an opportunity for students to interact with multiple perspectives as a class. In her ENGL 3880 syllabus, Betty noted the diversity presented in the classroom itself, writing, “[t]his course provides the opportunity to develop constructive relationships with each other” and that students should bring “their own viewpoints, experiences, and examples” to classroom and discussion board responses (Betty, 2023a, p. 4). Taylor had a similar statement on her syllabus: “Debate, critical inquiry, and intellectual diversity are essential elements to higher education and a process of learning” (Taylor, 2023b, p. 3). These two examples highlight the professors’ intentions to offer their students a multiplicity of views through classroom discussions. They do this by encouraging students to contribute their honest opinions about controversial topics while dispelling negative retaliatory responses from other classmates. Betty and Taylor are actively creating a classroom climate that promotes diverse viewpoints to be shared and heard.

In addition to reflection and diverse viewpoints, the literature reviewed also recommended incorporating critical-thinking competencies in order to promote ethical growth among students. Betty and Taylor note the importance of these aptitudes as well. In a description of written communication competency, Betty’s 3880 syllabus states: “[t]he program emphasizes critical thinking as well as traditional rhetorical skills because only insight can generate substance for the writer’s craft to shape” (Betty, 2023a, p. 6). There’s a reference here to students being insightful and generating their own views, which the literature suggests, is necessary for ethical growth, because individuals must develop their own individual ethical guidelines rather than be instructed by others. There are three references to critically thinking, analyzing, or evaluating on Taylor’s syllabus, however the most interesting assertion states that by the end of the course students should be able to: “[i]dentify and explain writing strategies in [their] own work” (Taylor, 2023b, p. 1). This expectation for students to be able to explain or justify their rhetorical writing decisions offers them an opportunity to critically analyze their choices—creating a writing practice that allows for ample self examination. This self awareness

is critical for ethical reasoning and aids students in making responsible rhetorical choices grounded in objective reasoning.

Assignments. Though her statement about critical thinking development is general on the syllabus, Betty refined this competency to an ethics focus for one of her course assignments. Betty had the 3880 students develop a one-to-two-page personal ethics statement. She encouraged students to consider future ethical conundrums and how they would respond. As a second part to the project, Betty asked students to develop a resume and cover letter for a prospective job they might want after graduation. In the guidelines, Betty asked, “[h]ow can you provide information about your ethics and build your ethos through these texts?” (Betty, 2023b, p. 1). Not only does this assignment link ethics directly to each students’ potential careers, but it likely increases student engagement through an accurately-perceived idea that students are practicing skills for their future. Betty mentioned this strategic method during our interview as well. She noted that she tends to focus ethical discussions on subjects such as climate change and social justice issues, rather than past business communication failures, because the learners know that these are the issues they’ll be dealing with in the future when we, older professors, aren’t around anymore.

Taylor also centered her 2201 assignments and course procedures in the students’ futures by focusing on impending ethical situations. She mentioned during our interview that she thought not having students consider the ethical implications of ChatGPT would be doing them a disservice, as we both agreed that AI was the next big ethical consideration for professional writers. During module six of the online course, which centered on AI, Taylor had the students write a discussion board that asked them to consider the ethical implications of ChatGPT in their respective fields. A very constructive discussion ensued, with Taylor chiming in and stimulating the discussion regularly. Taylor not only had students write discussion boards on ChatGPT and reflect on the ethical considerations surrounding AI, she also encouraged students to play around with the software and develop their own opinions about it (in an effort to stimulate critical

thinking and encourage personal analysis of individual issues). In addition to this smaller assignment, Taylor had the students write a four- to five-page paper on AI writing in their fields of study. As with Betty's assignment, this focus on the students' futures encourages engagement while also having students critically analyze potential ethical issues.

Instructional Methods

Service Learning

As the literature suggests, professors keen on ethical growth and community engagement often consider service-learning (SL) projects in their courses. These projects offer many overlapping learning outcomes that, according to researchers, encourage ethical growth, such as, critical thinking, exposure to diverse perspectives, and community outreach. Of the four professors I spoke with, one, Sarah (ENGL 2201), was offering a formal SL component to her course. Though another, Alex (ENGL 3040), who is fairly new to the institution and area, was planning to begin using SL again once she formed more roots within the community. Alex had used SL at her previous institution and was gracious enough to discuss those experiences with me during our interview.

Knowing that Sarah utilized SL, I began our interview by asking about the challenges of incorporating SL projects—especially with younger students. She acknowledged that it was difficult to set up SL projects in general; projects like these take a lot more time and effort to structure and there are many considerations to plan around, like course timelines and project suitability. However, Sarah noted that the hardest part about using SL projects with younger students were the logistical challenges. She specifically cited an instance where one of her students didn't have a car, so it made traveling to and from the community site difficult. But she took this hiccup genially, noting that it gave the students experience in everyday professional challenges that need creative solutions.

Sarah also cited a specific difficulty with incorporating SL into 2201: that of diverse majors. ENGL 2201 has a focus on writing within students' specific disciplines, and because Sarah wants students to choose SL projects that mean something to them, this presents a difficulty in that students will be working on a vast array of projects within the same course section. The logistics of letting each student do their own project can become a bit unruly. Sarah acknowledged that incorporating SL projects in her ENGL 1100: Foundations of College Writing course was actually easier because the students could all work on the same project and she didn't feel the need to have students venture into their own respective fields at that level.

Alex noted a further difficulty with young students and SL: that students at this level are unlikely to produce a usable product, "it's very rare that I can just hand a product over at the end [of the semester]" (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023). Alex said that she usually completes or edits the product so that the community partner can be compensated for their time by having a usable product, which takes time out of already-busy professor schedules. She does "warn" the community partners upfront that the product will likely not meet their exact specifications or needs. But, there are other concerns when working with community partners.

Alex and Sarah both noted the time commitments required for community partners as another difficulty of SL projects. Having partners devote their already-limited time to a project that might not produce a deliverable with decent quality limits the number of individuals keen to work with students. This challenge, however, isn't unique to young learners. But Alex pointed out an issue that might exacerbate the unwillingness of community partners to work with students: that of younger students' professionalism. Alex specifies that she feels most anxious when bringing in clients who might have different world-views and experiences than the students in her introductory courses, because they don't have as much experience working with diverse clientele. Alex said that in her experience students were very respectful and professional when working with individuals outside the classroom, however with younger students she tended to feel the need to keep an eye on their professionalism. When I asked

whether she felt more relaxed with older students' professionalism, she acknowledged that there were always professionalism concerns, no matter student class standing.

But even with these concerns, Alex noted the importance of having an outsider join the students' learning journey. When we discussed learners being professional and respectful to individuals with different backgrounds and beliefs, Alex liked the value of putting a face to an issue, "I think when you don't have a real person in front of you, that it's harder to [be respectful] at that age" (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023). She thought that bringing in outsiders from different backgrounds helped with student empathy. Sarah agreed, saying she often tried to send her education majors to lower-income schools so they could experience different perspectives and problems "on the ground" (Sarah, personal communication, August 21, 2023). She noted, "hearing [community partner experiences and problems] from somebody else can be really helpful" (Sarah, personal communication, August 21, 2023). The literature reviewed conferred that this multiplicity of voices and perspectives was good for students' ethical growth and allowed students to see issues from different perspectives.

In addition to providing diverse experiences, Alex and Sarah each discussed the authority outside voices can bring to ethical issues. Sarah noted that community partners actually "doing the work" seemed to make ethical issues resonate more with students (Sarah, personal communication, August 21, 2023). The professors each discussed the benefits of having an actual person detail their experiences rather than relying on case studies in a textbook, which can seem a bit impersonal. Of the whole SL-student experience, Sarah says,

I think most [students] experience some type of change. It may not be this huge ground-breaking type of change, but there's some kind of reflection that happens [...] and sometimes there are minor changes too, like, more kind of humbling, like, 'oh gosh, I didn't realize I had it so lucky or so good.'" (Sarah, personal communication, August 21, 2023)

For professors using SL projects for ethical growth, this ability to bring outside perspectives into the classroom seems to be one of the primary benefits of incorporating SL projects into the curriculum, but the professors mentioned other ways to present diverse ethical considerations in the classroom.

Classroom Practices and Learning Outcomes

Diverse Perspectives. Though SL instructors touted the valuable diversity of experiences presented through these projects, professors not using SL still found ways to incorporate diverse viewpoints into the classroom—by using the classroom itself to present various viewpoints. Of the professors included in this study, all acknowledged that they used classroom discussions or discussion board prompts to consider ethical issues as a class, and allow their students to discuss their opinions and hear others'. Taylor did acknowledge one caveat that these discussions are often better served with instructor input, which usually takes place organically within the classroom but not necessarily on discussion boards. "If we as faculty participate on discussion boards, we get better discussions" (*Taylor*, personal communication, August 28, 2023). Betty also supported this idea of moderating and aiding discussions—even in larger assignments. She made specific reference to an article she likes to have students read, "Giving Voice to the Silenced: Using Critical Discourse Analysis to Inform Crisis Communication Theory" by Carolyn Dunn and Michelle Eble. Betty acknowledged that there's a consideration that must be made in regard to this work: "it is a very complex text for these students" (*Betty*, personal communication, August 8, 2023). By "these students" Betty means younger students inexperienced with academic journal articles or workplace ethical issues. Her solution was to read and annotate the article together as a class using the Hypothesis app, so everyone in the class could see each other's annotations—aiding an ethical discussion about business crisis communication. Betty is presenting another example of how higher-level ethics discussions can be modified and used in lower-level class settings.

As Taylor and Betty have illustrated, presenting classroom ethical discussions—whether in-person or online—supplies a multiplicity of perspectives that researchers suggest increases ethical growth in students. And these activities can be completed without the added planning and logistical considerations presented by SL projects.

An inability to do a full SL project, however, doesn't preclude professors from inviting outsiders into the classroom. Alex and Sarah mentioned the value of inviting guests to speak to their classes—even if those guests weren't community partners. Specifically, Alex walked me through a situation at her previous institution where she invited a trans youth and their parent into the classroom to talk about the lack of information on gender protocols at the child's middle school—something Alex referred to as a “real-world scenario” that would help students think about “the cultural ties [...] with language and the power dynamics behind communications” (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023). The guests detailed how informational brochures or online resources could assist them in navigating the child's transition at the middle school. In the end, Alex's class did design a document for the guests, but Alex mainly focused on the value of having the class interact with an individual who was likely going through an experience her students had never experienced firsthand. “I think the importance for them [students] only starts to come alive when it is with a real person that they have to interact with and communicate with”. Alex also noted that her students were young, but they showcased maturity and respectfulness to guests. The learners were engaged and asked thoughtful questions. Sarah also had success with bringing in guests to offer a diversity of perspectives but noted that when she couldn't do this, she got creative, “I'll even just use TEDTalks” (Sarah, personal communication, August 21, 2023). Though using online resources like videos may not be the preferred method of offering outside perspectives, the professors interviewed agreed that finding ways to incorporate diverse perspectives was something they regularly did in their courses.

Interspersing Ethics Instruction. All of the professor-interviewees agreed on how they meld ethics instruction into their courses. The professors discussed the value of students incorporating ethics organically, just like they would in a professional environment. Alex and Taylor pointed out that many students didn't "get" the ethical lessons from reading a section on ethics in a textbook—the students needed direct guidance (not abstract discussion) on incorporating ethics into their writing practices. Alex elucidated, "I'm not explicit [...] I ask questions like, 'how can we be more inclusive?' or 'how could we be more connected and empathetic to our client's perspective?'" (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023). Educators are suggesting that applying the ethics instruction directly to the course assignments seems to make the ethical lessons clearer and more practical to students.

The research on ethical instruction is also filled with examples such as these. Professors are incorporating ethics more and more organically and moving away from the conscripted "ethics section" listed on the course schedule. I asked the director of ECU's PWID program, Dr. Donna Kain, whether this interspersing trend accounted for why there wasn't a required and separate ethics course in the program, and she confirmed that ethics instruction was a learning outcome "emphasized across the program in all classes and at all levels" (D. Kain, personal communication, September 25, 2023). Spigelman and Grobman (2006) also sought to set their professional writing program this way, which signals a shift that started two decades ago and is still persisting.

Critical Thinking. Critical thinking instruction was mentioned so heavily in the literature, that I felt obligated to discuss these instructional practices with the interviewees. Critical thinking development, of course, has its uses outside of ethical considerations, but for the purposes of this research, I asked each professor how they aided students in this journey.

Betty incorporates an assignment that has students develop their own codes of ethics, which, coincidentally, is a direct recommendation from the literature (Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Ross, 2021). She has students write their ethical codes then consider future ethical dilemmas

and how they might react in those situations. This assignment encourages critical thinking by having students practice forethought and multiple outcomes to current actions.

Sarah took a more indirect approach to critical thinking development. She has students do “a deep dive into the research about what’s happening” on an ethical issue and encourages them to think critically about the various perspectives of the issue (*Sarah*, personal communication, August 21, 2023). Sarah said she likes to encourage students to do this even if they assert that they feel a certain way about an identified issue. She noted that this “deep dive” was unlikely to change anyone’s opinion, but that it was good practice for students to critically analyze a variety of arguments. And, indeed the literature agrees that it’s important for students to be critical of their own viewpoints and practice being self-aware in order to produce ethically sound communication (Boss, 1994; Bushneil, 1999; Chen, 2021; Driver & Hoffman, 2022; Dubinsky, 2002; Hartung, 1998; Hedberg, 2017; Kienzler, 2001; Micciche, 2005; Moore, 1999; Ross, 2021; Spigelman & Grobman, 2006).

Taylor also encouraged self-awareness through critical-thinking and individual decision-making in her course procedures. She explained how she did this in one of her course documents, writing:

While there are course assignment sheets, there are no rubrics. You'll need to engage in critical thinking to decide how to meet the goals and objectives of the assignments. Similarly, there's no one way or one answer to the topics and projects in this course. You need to use some creative problem solving to figure out what to do. Some discussion boards and activities will engage creativity more than others, but remember that you have creative control on how you approach your writing projects. (*Taylor*, 2023c)

The literature discusses the other-than-ethical uses of critical thinking development. That critical thinking can be used in a variety of applications and situations, but that it is one of the key elements of ethical growth. Taylor’s procedural choice epitomizes that assertion. This not only

develops students' critical thinking skills by having them practice creating their own solutions to assignments but also gives them authority and responsibility over the writing they produce.

Though the professors' approach critical-thinking development through a variety of techniques, all have noted the importance of this competency and present various means to encourage its development.

Challenges with Ethics Instruction

The Need to Be Explicit without Imposing Instructor Viewpoints

Though all the professors interviewed acknowledged the importance of ethics instruction in lower-level professional writing courses, they also discussed the challenges they faced when incorporating these competencies. Alex, Betty, and Taylor reported the need to be explicit when choosing *which* ethical issues to discuss with their classes. Taylor commented that the younger students often couldn't pick an issue that was an actual ethical consideration—they might choose something that was an argument-based discussion, like school uniforms. However, when the students were given the ethical dilemma—in the forms of housing injustice, ChatGPT, or climate change—the students rose to the challenge, discussing the considerations that needed to be examined. This seems to speak to a need for modeling ethical debates. Likely, these are not issues that have been presented to students previously, so on first encounter, professors might find the need to be more direct with their instruction.

However, this straightforward approach came with its own challenge: the need to balance being direct without imposing professor viewpoints. Sarah discussed the difficulty of considering ethical issues as a class in an unbiased manner, acknowledging that she often said this to students: “you guys can probably guess how I feel, but what I care more about is how you feel...but not just how you feel but why you feel that way” (*Sarah*, personal communication, August 21, 2023). I told Sarah that this acknowledgement of her own opinions was likely very encouraging for students and would likely make them more amenable to sharing their opinions with the class. I also noted that Sarah was asking students to engage in a bit of critical thinking

during these class discussions by reminding them that they needed to consider *why* they had these opinions. By centering the discussion on the learners' views, instructors can avoid swaying students' opinions on ethical issues—even when it is necessary for the professor to be direct about those issues.

Alex discussed this balancing act as well. She specifically mentioned the housing crisis and gentrification as being something she liked to bring to students' attention, but noted that she didn't want to be “too preachy” when she discussed these issues. She elucidated on this point saying,

I also want students to feel comfortable wherever they are and however they identify...I don't want to, sort of, push on them [...] I think there should be room for wherever everybody is, sort of, in their own political spectrum and value spectrum...as long as it doesn't violate someone else's self. (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023)

She went on to say that having students develop their own ethical self was the goal; that she wanted to increase “[...] awareness of ways to be more ethical, rather than going for some, like, perfect standard” (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023).

Professors had various ways of working around appearing preachy or pushing their own agendas. Several cited bringing in outside voices through guest speakers or TEDTalks. As mentioned, Betty, Sarah, and Taylor were all direct with their students, reminding them that everyone has biases, but that the students should form their own opinions and consider their own presumptions. Alex let students know that they could come to her if they ever felt uncomfortable with any of the course assignments—specifically if the student felt like the assignment went against their own beliefs. Through these considerations, professors are able to promote students' own ethical journeys while showcasing an acknowledgement of their own biases—an important example for students to witness.

Departmental Support

Professors' responses to whether they needed more departmental support while incorporating ethics into their professional writing courses varied widely. Taylor didn't feel that she needed more support. If anything, she enjoyed the independence of developing her courses without excessive oversight. Betty took a more neutral stance, noting that she felt that the work done by faculty members within the department ingrained the importance of ethics instruction throughout the program, but that it didn't hurt to be more explicit about ethics instruction guidelines and expectations. Sarah and Alex, who advocate heavily for guest speakers and outside projects, both agreed that some financial support or incentives for their community partners would be welcome. Both professors understood that the funding often wasn't available, so Alex noted that some internal workshops might be useful. She thought getting instructors together to discuss ideas for ethics instruction would be very useful and productive and allow professors to fully appreciate the department's stance on ethics instruction in professional writing courses.

With such varying points of view on departmental support, Alex's idea of optional sharing workshops in which ethics instruction and other instructional methods could be discussed, seems to be the most promising recommendation to surface from this interview question. Such events could help professors like Betty gain a better understanding of the department's stance on ethics instruction while the optional nature of the workshop would suit professors like Taylor who could decide for themselves whether they needed to attend.

Conclusions

Student Response

Through the interviews and my observation of Taylor's 2201 course, I was able to witness the enthusiasm students, even those in lower class standings, bring to the discussion of ethics. During our discussion about incorporating ethics instruction specifically into lower-level professional writing courses, Alex noted, "young people are capable of thinking about ethics and values. I mean, little kids do" (Alex, personal communication, August 25, 2023). She went on to discuss how she always noticed students being empathetic when working with clients on SL projects, and that, even if the students had different ideological views to those of the project, the students tended to shelf those in favor of being professional and considerate.

Sarah, likewise, commented on her students' responses to being in different professional situations than they had originally anticipated for their careers. She acknowledged that there was unlikely to be an immense change, but that the students did experience some fundamental shifts in the ways they perceived ethical and civic considerations.

Additionally, Betty and Taylor discussed how centering their classroom ethical discussions in future issues the students were likely to encounter elicited engagement and thoughtful reflection from the learners. On my observation of Taylor's course, I witnessed this firsthand, with students contributing insightful ideas to the ethical considerations/ChatGPT discussion board. Their responses to other classmates were well written and thought out, and I tend to agree with Sarah and the literature, that even if these indicators are not the product of fundamental change in the learners, they are likely the seeds that will germinate larger change (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008).

Suggestions for Professors

Based on the literature, interviews, and course observation, I've identified six basic recommendations for professors seeking to incorporate ethics into their lower-level professional writing courses.

Permeating Ethics Instruction throughout the Course

Instructors should avoid doing a segregated ethics section and rather have ethics permeate the course. Taylor mentioned that in the past, she would have students read a chapter on ethics and it would “go over their heads” (*Taylor*, personal communication, August 28, 2023). Alex refined this point by noting that this type of instruction was often too abstract for younger learners. Because of this, many of the interviewees incorporated ethics organically throughout the course—linking many of the ethical considerations to actual projects or future considerations for the students. This aided instructors in discussing ethics in a manner that would appear less sanctimonious to students and would encourage ethical writing considerations to become an intuitive thought process for learners. Instructors hoping to intersperse ethics instruction could consider doing large SL projects with underserved populations, but smaller projects, such as Betty’s reflection paper on developing an ethical code that students could use throughout the course and into the future, are also very effective.

Being More Explicit with Ethics’ Role in Writing

The research and my review of interviewees’ course documents suggest that being explicit about the role ethics plays in writing encourages change in students. Betty and Taylor used their course documents to emphasize that there is always bias in writing—no matter how objective a writer tries to be. Sarah and Alex, likewise, admitted to their classes that they were aware of their own presumptions and opinions—modeling a self-awareness that, according to the literature, is critical in ethical development. Whether these discussions happen in writing or verbally, a clear-cut professor acknowledgement about the link between ethics and the rhetorical devices used in professional writing is helpful for younger students.

Diverse Perspectives

Again, the research and those professors of lower-level professional writing courses that participated in this study agree that offering students diverse perspectives helps them grow ethically and civically. Educators can feature a multiplicity of voices in various ways, through:

- Guest speakers, like community partners or individuals from underserved communities
- Detailed case studies with appropriate classroom discussion to help younger students better understand the issues presented
- Online resources, such as TEDTalks that present diverse opinions on an issue

Offering students different perspectives may not change their minds about certain topics, but it appears to help them become more empathetic to certain individuals and situations.

Critical Thinking and Reflection

Critical thinking development is useful for more than just ethical growth, which is likely why the literature and the interviewees agree on its inclusion in professional writing courses. This learning outcome is made all the more effective by including ethics alongside the critical thinking instruction. Educators might consider having students work through potential future ethical scenarios, like Betty did with her 3880 students or they might present a group project in which students have to work through a variety of ethical considerations like Alex did with the trans youth SL assignment. Whichever size project an instructor chooses, the most important facet is that professors allow the students to formulate their own conclusions through careful thought.

These student musings should be further developed through reflection where students justify those conclusions in a way that makes sense to an outside observer. According to the literature, using critical thinking and reflection to have students develop their ethical codes, then having students discuss these codes with their classmates (diverse perspectives) proves to be highly effective in upper-level professional writing courses. Though this specific formula was not discussed during our interviews, the professors that I spoke with did use each of these assignments (developing ethical codes, reflection, and class discussions) with their lower-level students. If such assignments can be used with lower-level students separately, it makes sense that they could be used collectively to great effect, just as they are in upper-level courses.

Increasing Student Engagement

Educators should attempt to increase student buy-in when introducing ethical dilemmas or considerations in writing. They can do this by having students search for their own ethical interests, though three of the interviewees noted the difficulty of this with younger students who might not have a full grasp on what constitutes an ethical issue. Conversely, professors can choose an ethical issue that they know will interest the students because it is directly related to the students' futures. Taylor did this by choosing a topic like ChatGPT—it's topical, interesting, and presents a lot of considerations that lead to fruitful discussions. Betty, likewise, focused on students' futures by giving them an assignment that asked the learners to put themselves in their prospective careers. Student engagement is important with any potential learning outcome, but the literature and interviewees agree that, in younger and older students, linking lessons to students' futures and interests helps aid engagement and learning.

Call for Future Research

I asked many of the professors whether they thought more research was needed on ethics instruction in lower-level professional writing courses. I included this question because at the beginning of my research, I wasn't entirely convinced that I was doing something meaningful. I considered that if these ethics instructional methods worked in upper-level courses, then surely they would work in lower-level ones. But the more literature I reviewed, the more I wondered why lower-level professional writing instructors weren't writing about their methods. And if I was going to examine why that was, I might as well find out what those methods were—if they existed. At the start of the methodology section, I considered that there might be three reasons for the lack of research on ethical instruction in lower-level professional writing courses. They were:

1. Instructors were choosing not to cover ethics in lower-level professional writing courses due to the students' ages or time constraints

2. Instructors were covering ethical issues, but not extensively enough to warrant research
3. Instructors were covering ethics in lower-level professional writing courses, but choosing not to conduct research or report on their findings

From the interviews, I know that the third option is the likely reason. I'm none the wiser about why professors are choosing not to conduct research in these lower-level courses—possibly they are faced with larger class sizes, resulting in a greater number of time constraints. But the actual reason is outside the scope of this research. The real question is whether my interviewees agreed that there needed to be more research on this topic. I asked the question as objectively as possible, but in a modeling of Sarah's honesty about biases, I likely wasn't convincing any of the participants that I didn't have a clear opinion on what my answer to this question would have been. All of my participants agreed that there needed to be more research. Sarah explained, "I'm going to say since I don't know what research is out there, there's not enough" (*Sarah*, personal communication, August 21, 2023). Taylor considered the research that exists as compared to the research that is needed, stating:

We know a lot about how to teach writing, the writing process, what helps students develop as writers, but we don't necessarily know as much about these sort of content areas and how those impact the writing development. [...] So, when having students write an ethical paper, how much is about the student understanding the ethical implications of those ethical situations on their fields and how much is about learning the writing process. [...] Students need to know how the content and the writing process are intertwined, but they also need to understand how these ethical issues impact them as writers in their field. (*Taylor*, personal communication, August 28, 2023)

As Taylor points out, there is a need for further research in these content areas of professional writing. Certainly, the main goal of a writing course is to produce good writers, but learners have to be trained in more areas than the technical writing process in order to truly become good writers.

Because of this identified need, future research should focus on ethics instructional methods in lower-level professional writing courses in much the same way current researchers approach upper-level courses. Future researchers might consider doing a pre- and post-semester standardized ethical development test, such as the Defining Issues Test (DIT) or the Moral Justification Scale (MJS) used by Bernacki and Jaeger (2008). In using standardized testing, more longitudinal methods could be incorporated by testing students at the beginning and ending of their programs (freshman year to graduation) to understand the program's effect on ethical development.

In lieu of quantitative data, professors might add to the body of research by reporting on their pedagogical methods in these lower-level professional writing courses. After all, the four professors interviewed for this report acknowledged some considerations specific to younger students—like helping with ethics topic selection and logistical considerations for younger students when incorporating SL projects. By adding more pedagogical recommendations and classroom observations to the public sphere, current and future professors will be more successful at incorporating ethics instruction into their lower-level professional writing courses.

Final Thoughts

Ethics is merely one aspect of professional writing instruction. There are many others professors have to consider when developing young writers. But, as I've seen in the literature review and in interviewee responses, many of these considerations, such as critical thinking development and professionalism, overlap and enhance ethics instruction. Professors should begin to share the ethics instructional practices they use in lower-level professional writing courses. Other educators would benefit from detailed explanations of methods and lessons

learned when considering a younger learner. There should also be more research done in lower-level professional writing courses in order to better understand which of these methods are most effective. Finally, writing-intensive programs might benefit from making their desire for incorporated ethics instruction more explicit. By sharing lessons learned, conducting further research, and being explicit in instructional expectations, professional writing, as a field, will benefit and produce a more ethically-conscious workforce.

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APPENDIX: ECU IRB APPROVAL MEMO



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284**
rede.ecu.edu/umcibr/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Meghan Melton](#)
CC: [Matthew Cox](#)
Date: 6/29/2023
Re: [UMCIRB 23-001236](#)
Thesis: Ethical Instruction Interviews

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 6/29/2023. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1/2C.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Consent Paragraph(0.01)	Consent Forms
Interview Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Request Email Language(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Thesis Prospectus(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

