

# Using Blackboard Learning Management System to Improve Writing Skills

Col. Thomas J. Gibbons, EdD, U.S. Army, Retired

**W**e teach an elective at the U.S. Naval War College called “Foundations of Moral Obligation” that was developed by Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale almost forty years ago. The course is a primer for different philosophers and schools of thought. It provides an opportunity for students to read, write about, and discuss several classic works of philosophy and literature including original texts by Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Mill, and other contemporary philosophers. The purpose of this essay is to illustrate how we use the Blackboard Learning Management System in the elective to improve student writing and critical thinking skills.

We discovered that a majority of incoming students in both the joint professional military education senior- (JPME II) and intermediate-level (JPME I) courses have not written in an academic environment since their undergraduate years. Most are comfortable with public speaking, and their briefing skills are adequate. However, their writing skills are often lacking simply because they do not write on a regular basis. As staff officers, they are encouraged to cut and paste excerpts from regulations and directives into coherent policy letters. Yet, they are not writing original ideas. It is difficult and even terrifying for many to put their thoughts on paper during a graded exercise for the first time in several years. Tensions mount and apprehension sets in as written requirements are due. Nonetheless, it gets easier the more students actually write and receive feedback on their work.


In the past, students submitted a fifteen-page essay at the end of the trimester, usually about one of the philosophers they studied. The instructors carefully read the essays and provided written feedback after classes were done at the end of the trimester. What is the problem with this model? It is the same process used at many colleges and universities throughout the United States, so it must be considered a best practice.

**Col. Thomas J. Gibbons, EdD, U.S. Army, retired**, has worked for the associate provost at the Naval War College since 2008. He has a BS from the U.S. Military Academy, an MS from George Washington University, an MA from the Naval War College, and an EdD from Johnson & Wales University. A former rotary-wing aviator, he flew missions from U.S. Navy ships during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He also commanded 1st Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment (ATTACK) at Fort Drum, New York, and served as J1 of the U.S. Pacific Command before coming to the Naval War College as the Army advisor.

However, we implemented a better model to improve students' critical thinking and writing skills. Our students actually write a weekly one- or two-page posting about what they have read using Blackboard. Students post at least one page of questions, comments, criticisms, or points to be explored further to Blackboard two days before class. Students are also required to read each other's comments and to provide a written response to at least two of them. This enables both students and faculty to come to class prepared to engage on the points raised by their colleagues. We actually hit the ground running in class because the discussions have already started. If students find the reading particularly difficult on some point, their posting may ask for clarification—that, too, is a useful contribution in terms of steering our discussion to the points we most need to take up in class. Instructors review and print the weekly postings. Each student receives written feedback and comments on their writing style and the content of their posting prior to class.

A best practice to improve one's writing skills is to write more often and get immediate feedback on your work. As Adm. Jim Stavridis wrote, "Publishing your thoughts for others to see, however, extends the reach of your ideas and sparks a larger discussion, a larger professional conversation."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, each student receives feedback from their peers who comment on the content of the postings made on Blackboard. Peer feedback is often more relevant and valuable to students. Moreover, providing peer feedback allows students to continue to hone their writing skills. In fact, we have seen that some students are often more concerned with the peer feedback than the instructor's comments.

Over the course of the ten-week trimester, we have seen a substantial improvement in the quality of student postings. Errors in grammar, syntax, and style are minimized, and the students' ability to convey their thoughts clearly and succinctly is much improved. The Blackboard model also enables students to spread the workload for written work across the ten-week trimester.

Repetitive writing combined with instructor feedback is clearly a "best practice" to help military learners at both the senior and intermediate levels improve their writing and critical thinking skills. The Blackboard Learning Management System is an excellent tool to accomplish this. 

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## Notes

1. Jim Stavridis, "Read, Think, Write, and Publish," *Proceedings* 134, no. 8/1.266 (August 2008): 16.