

Course Design

WELL 2100: Writing for Wellness

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A four-credit class offered at the University of Denver (DU), Writing for Wellness explores current research on health and well-being and engages students in the role writing can play in personal, academic, and professional wellness. Students explore academic research on writing for wellness, experiment with wellness writing approaches themselves, compose a wellness blog, and design and carry out a wellness writing self-study as part of the course. Writing for Wellness is taught asynchronously online to a maximum of fifteen students per section. The course launched in December 2020 in a condensed, four-week intensive format during DU's interterm (described below). Since 2020, I have offered several additional interterm sections of the course.

The course design is a hybrid model of instruction that supports student intellectual growth in writing and research practices, while also using writing as a tool to improve wellness. I designed the course as a writing studies pedagogue and scholar with a deep concern for student wellness in the 2020s. Thus, the course supports writing growth through rhetorical practices, a process approach, and authentic audiences, while also asking students to explore and experiment with writing practices to improve their individual wellness.

In my initial conception, I designed the course for the applied writing requirement of DU's minor in writing practices; however, the course is presently housed in the cross-disciplinary wellness minor. While there are nuances between wellness and well-being, I designed the course around wellness dimensions that undergird the wellness minor and living and learning community at DU: physical health, community wellness, emotional wellness, spiritual wellness, and mental well-being.

Institutional Context

Institutional Upheaval

Established in 1864, DU is the oldest independent private university in the Rocky Mountain region. With the broad vision to be a great private institution dedicated to the public good, the University has seen sweeping changes in the last ten years. Under the leadership of Chancellor Rebecca Chopp (2014–2019), DU launched a new strategic plan in 2016—IMPACT 2025—which included enhanced attention to global and collaborative learning, community-engaged and cross-disciplinary work, and several capital

projects to foster economic growth and neighborhood engagement. Three years into the ten-year plan, Chancellor Chopp stepped down for health reasons; since then, the university has had two additional provosts and navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, DU acquired a 720-acre property bordering Roosevelt National forest—the James C. Kennedy Mountain Campus (KMC)—and began developing curricular and co-curricular initiatives to take place there. In 2022, DU became the only private institution in the Rocky Mountain Region to achieve Carnegie Classification as a Research 1 (R1) institution, motivating an institutional rebrand and reconception of its university identity. These events occurred in rapid succession, each portending new and important impacts on student experience—some advantageous, some challenging.

The 4D Experience and Student Wellness

Bringing together the vision for the transition to R1, the opportunities afforded by the new mountain campus, and the remaining goals of IMPACT 2025, DU's current chancellor unveiled a key strategic imperative to offer students “a unique global, holistic ‘4D’ [four-dimensional] student experience.” Following a two-year process of planning and development by faculty, staff, and administrators from across campus, the University launched this “4D Experience” to support students in four dimensions: advancing intellectual growth, exploring character, pursuing careers and lives of purpose, and cultivating well-being (Hernandez). Organized through partnerships between executive leadership in student affairs, academic affairs, and career and professional development, the 4D Experience helps students build individualized pathways through academics, co-curricular programming, mentorship, and critical reflection—while engaging principles of justice, equity diversity, and inclusion.

Of particular interest for the present course design is an explicit focus on emotional, financial, physical, social/community, and spiritual well-being. Even as the name of the initiative suggests discrete parts (i.e., four dimensions), the University's vision for the 4D Experience is that wellness principles should infuse all aspects of student life on campus and empower students to “develop meaningful connections and a sense of connection to something larger than themselves” (“Four Dimensions”). It was by coincidence that DU's concerted focus on student well-being preceded the U.S. arrival of COVID-19 by a few short months. Of course, as with many other institutions of higher learning across the U.S., the pandemic elevated concerns around student wellness and well-being at DU.

The University Writing Program Minor in Writing Practices

The University Writing Program (UWP) was founded in 2006, under the leadership of Doug Hesse. I joined the program as part of the first faculty cohort and have continued as a teaching professor since then. The UWP offers a two-course writing sequence wherein first year students “develop the complex writing abilities needed in contemporary academic, professional, and civic life.” In addition, the UWP offers a 20-credit minor in writing practices for students interested in further developing their writing skills and exploring writing studies theory and concepts.

To complete the minor, students take a series of courses in writing theory, history, and applied writing, and develop an e-portfolio as a capstone to their work. Two applied writing courses are required for the minor. As a pilot course, I developed *Writing for Wellness* under the course code WRIT 2701: Topics in Applied Writing. Other courses in this classification include newswriting and reporting, introduction to publishing, and rhetorical grammar. In addition to traditional research writing assignments that apply the ideas of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s “audience addressed” and “audience invoked” and Robert Johnson’s “audience involved,” *Writing for Wellness* employs a contemplative writing approach, as described by Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, as “a practice that emphasizes process rather than outcome” (124).

In addition to this “process rather than outcome” orientation, the course draws on both writing studies and psychological conceptions of expressive writing, adopting a more capacious and cross-disciplinary approach. In this way, the course fits within both the UWP model of writing and the University’s minor in wellness that “weaves together many different disciplines, curricula, and facets of experience to promote conscious growth and dynamic balance in life” (“Wellness Minor” 185). Thus, after its initial offering through the UWP (as WRIT 2701), the writing course is now officially homed in the wellness minor (as WELL 2100) and cross-listed in the applied writing category of the writing minor.

Theoretical Rationale

Expressivism: A Cross-Disciplinary Marriage

In his 2017 article for *College Composition and Communication*, “Don’t Call It Expressivism: Legacies of a ‘Tacit Tradition,’” Eli Goldblatt calls upon readers to recognize the echoes of expressivism in present-day writing studies theory and pedagogy. He identifies four legacies of an expressive tradition:

1. The individual, embedded in culture and history, must find a way of being in the world through expression that cannot be adequately prescribed by textbooks, standardized curricula, or social norms.
2. A crucial social character of individual expression involves identification with a home group's discourse—its rhythms, sayings, registers, vocabulary, and style—as a matter of historical location and linguistic resource.
3. Community literacy projects become meaningful politically and socially when they recognize and support expression for groups and individuals not usually sponsored in their own autonomous uses of reading and writing.
4. Teaching as a profession requires personal commitment, and the teaching of writing—that founding mission of composition—challenges and rewards us especially because both individuals and social groups have so much at stake in their developing literacies. (443)

When I read Goldblatt's article, I was in the process of developing a writing workshop centered on workplace wellness for the annual women's conference at my home institution. While I was familiar with expressive writing through the lens of late 20th-century debates between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow, I had recently discovered the language of expressive writing in other disciplinary contexts. Digging into social science research, I found that guided expressive writing reduces stress (Barry and Singer), enhances social relationships (Lepore et al.), and improves academic performance (Frattaroli and Thomas). While these outcomes were not all that surprising, I learned further that expressive writing has also been shown to improve lung function among asthma patients (Smith et al.), reduce pain for people with rheumatoid arthritis (Lumley et al.), and reduce sleep disturbances (Arigo and Smyth) among other wellness outcomes. Indeed, I found a growing body of research suggesting that feelings of well-being were improved through a variety of expressive writing practices (Pennebaker), including journaling and critical reflection (Pennebaker and Smyth), which were regular, if peripheral, features of my existing writing classes.

At the same time, I was witnessing firsthand the mental health crisis among college students in my classes, with data suggesting that depression rates had more than doubled since 2009. I wondered if there was a way to marry the expressive traditions tacit in my field with the expressive writing described in social science research. Could these two approaches be brought together in an effort to open up and sustain new conversations about wellness on my campus? Could these two conceptions of expressive writing be synthesized to positively impact both writing and wellness outcomes?

In an attempt to answer this question, I developed *Writing for Wellness* for DU undergraduates. Rooted in both empirical social science research and threshold concepts in composition, the course is designed to engage students in an exploration of the intersections of writing and wellness. To accomplish this, students are asked to: 1) research and explore wellness writing techniques, in order to 2) design and conduct a self-study on self-selected wellness writing practice, and 3) compose effective wellness-themed texts for audiences of educated readers.

Reflection and Design Thinking

In the first unit, students establish a wellness baseline through a series of design thinking activities from Bill Burnett and Dave Evans' *Designing Your Life (DYL)*, with linked writing reflections (see Taczak; Yancey). *DYL* emphasizes design-thinking skills such as defining/reframing, empathy, prototyping, and creative confidence (Royalty et al.). Critical reflection supports meaning-making following these activities. For example, students complete the *DYL* health, work, play, and love dashboard to establish their wellness baseline in these areas; then, they use Carol Rodgers' model for reflection—presence in experience, description of experience, analysis of experience, and experimentation—to compose a related written reflection.

Based on these activities and their wellness needs and interests, students select a wellness area they wish to study during the condensed course and design a one-week self-study to explore it. The study proposal includes background on the wellness writing practice, the student's rationale for choosing it, description of their study protocol, and an annotated bibliography of scholarly sources. Students conduct their study over a one-week period and compose a report at the end of the term providing analysis of their findings and a discussion of contexts where the wellness writing technique might be useful.

In addition to major assignments linked to the wellness self-study, students complete shorter assignments that facilitate knowledge-building around writing and wellness practices. For example, for the week one discussion post, students explore the Authentic Happiness project developed by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, and take a happiness test. After the test, students reflect on the feedback delivered by the tool and how it informs understanding of their wellness. The primary purpose of readings and shorter assignments is to introduce different wellness metrics and practices and invite reflection on how such practices might improve students' wellness.

Writing for Wellness & Writing about Wellness

The course is a hybrid in that it contains established research writing approaches—such as a proposal and annotated bibliography—while introduc-

ing expressive techniques and design-thinking activities where students engage their own wellness. One example of how writing for wellness and writing about wellness come together is through the blog assignment. Students read Kerry Dirk's "Navigating Genres," read several wellness blogs, and complete an analysis of the wellness blog genre. Later in the term, students use the wellness technique they have practiced as the content for developing their own wellness blog. Effectively, students learn about and practice wellness techniques, while also exploring ways in which other authors and students might communicate about wellness.

Similarly, students participate in a recorded wellness writing session from the Colorado Behavioral Health and Wellness summit to practice an expressive writing technique. Later in the term, they develop their own activity for the summit based on the technique they have studied during the term. A writing for/writing about wellness approach allows students the benefit of practicing the techniques and engaging in practices for the sake of their wellness, while also developing the skills to craft messages about the techniques for various audiences.

Critical Reflection

Though the *Writing for Wellness* course was a few years in development, I taught the first iteration of it during the December 2020 interterm. At DU, winter interterm courses are offered during the break between the Thanksgiving and New Year's holidays (between our fall and winter quarters).

Though many classes were offered online in fall 2020, the DU campus was open and student dormitories were full. Thus, many students and faculty were in-person—masked, unvaccinated, and subject to myriad safety processes and protocols. Teaching and learning under these conditions had a profound impact on students and faculty alike. After teaching my first class in early September 2020, I cried in my car amid feelings of fear, uncertainty, and insecurity about my ability to teach in-person: I could not see student faces under masks; I was short of breath and my glasses were fogging up; and I was poorly managing a new camera, audio system, and videoconferencing tools to support students attending virtually. I was fearful of the virus and felt ill-equipped to manage my class for emotional and practical reasons. It was my eighteenth year of teaching in the college classroom, yet I felt more insecure and vulnerable than in my first days on the job. I mention my own experience here as a means to articulate the high-stress conditions and fear that preceded the winter interterm period when I initially piloted the course.

During the December 2020 pilot, students were processing trauma and grappling with missed opportunities and unmet expectations. Students were isolated, triggered, and exhausted by the pandemic learning experience. Even

as I have now taught another five sections of the course—adjusting and tweaking as I go—I continue to teach the course with a profound sense of gratitude and compassion for the student experiences shared therein. Essentially, the timing of the pilot set a tone of compassion and vulnerability for my interactions with students and student work that has carried into ensuing sections of WELL 2100.

As I have continued to develop the course, one area requiring further development and consideration is community wellness. The design of the course engages students almost exclusively around individual wellness (emotional, academic, professional). To my mind, the present iteration lacks attention to one of the “two impulses that compel writers” described by Goldblatt: “the desire to speak out of your most intimate experiences and to connect with communities in need” (442). While the WELL 2100 projects ask students to identify audiences who might benefit from the wellness writing techniques they research, the course lacks sufficient attention to features, qualities, and definitions of community wellness. While public health and other fields do maintain robust literature on community wellness, exploring the topic through the lens of community literacy projects and/or community writing workshops would address the collective benefits of these techniques and more fully engage students in conversations around wellness writing, particularly given DU’s institutional dedication to the public good.

Along similar lines, at time of publication, the course has been offered exclusively during interterm periods—between and around our three main academic terms (fall, winter, spring). This intentional approach provides students a shorter and more concentrated opportunity to engage wellness principles and techniques. Additionally, since few students take more than one course during interterm, they are able to closely focus on their wellness. In final reflections, students often note the benefits of taking the course during interterm, as it’s a rare opportunity to consider their wellness outside the demands of a full-time course load. However, interterm is an independent academic period that exists outside DU’s traditional three-term academic year; thus, students wishing to enroll in the course must pay separate tuition (though partial scholarships are available). In order to make the course accessible to all students, I could offer a version of the course during the academic year.

In closing, I note that developing and teaching WELL 2100 has impacted my approach to all the undergraduate writing courses I teach at the University and informed both my faculty development efforts and courses in DU’s First Year Seminar program as well. Rare are opportunities to truly engage personal wellness within the context of a for-credit course steeped in scholarly research. Indeed, many students expressed similar gratitude for the opportunity to engage with each other around such vital and personal topics in an academic setting.

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