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Developing professional writing in social work education: perspectives of students and lecturers in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Professional writing is a central, yet often overlooked, component of social work practice and education. This article examines the ways in which teaching of professional writing is perceived and experienced within social work education, based on the perspectives of students and lecturers in two Italian universities. The research involved students and teachers from a social work bachelor's degree program at two universities in Northern Italy. The students' perspectives were explored through a self-completion questionnaire, and the lecturers' views were collected in a focus group with four academics who were involved in the educational activities. The findings indicate that although students recognize the importance of professional writing, they experience difficulties in integrating it into practice, particularly during internships. The lecturers emphasized the need for a coherent pedagogical approach that transcends fragmented methods and positions writing as a critical, cross-disciplinary competence. The findings highlight the need for a broader understanding of the role of writing in social work and its implications for educating social workers who are critically engaged and ethically responsible.

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Introduction

Professional writing is central in everyday social work practice and education and is widely recognized as an essential component of the profession (Lillis et al., 2020; Rai & Lillis, 2013; Rai et al., 2025; Thompson, 2021), yet in the Italian context, it remains largely overlooked in both education and professional training, with only a limited and fragmented body of national contributions addressing it explicitly (Bertotti & Merlini, 2009; Bini, 2018; Raineri & Landi, 2023). Recent literature has emphasized the tension between the bureaucratic perspective on writing and its potential as a reflective, relational, and political means (Author, 2024; Lillis, 2017; Rai et al., 2025).

At the same time, the professional literature on social work report writing remains limited (Cortés García et al., 2024; Rai & Lillis, 2013), particularly in relation to how writing is taught and experienced within social work education. This study addresses this gap by examining how professional writing is taught, perceived, and experienced from

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the perspectives of students and lecturers in two Italian universities. Drawing on questionnaires completed by students and focus groups with lecturers, it explores how writing is positioned within educational settings, contributing to the broader debate on its role in social work education and addressing specific challenges within the Italian academic context.

By foregrounding writing as a means of reflection and critical engagement, this study aims to counter the dominant trend toward the technicalization of professional education while reasserting the centrality of its ethical and political dimensions. In doing so, it highlights the implications of professional writing for curriculum design and for the development of professional identity.

The empirical focus is specifically on report writing, which, together with case recording, is one of the main tools used by social workers to describe service users' situations, provide evidence of their needs, and support proposed actions. Report writing constitutes a key genre where the professional, ethical, and educational dimensions of social work writing become most visible (Cortés García et al., 2024; Roose et al., 2009).

Background

Social work has been described as a 'writing-intensive profession' (Lillis, 2023, p. 6), yet writing is often perceived as a bureaucratic task, linked to institutional control and accountability, rather than as an opportunity for critical reflection and ethical engagement (Lillis, 2017; Thompson, 2022). As some authors have indicated, the time, style, and approach to writing in social work have become increasingly normalized according to the logic of efficiency and accountability, making the development of authentic and reflective writing more difficult (Lillis et al., 2020). This institutional pressure is also reflected in practitioners' everyday experiences of writing. Practitioners often report feeling overwhelmed by the amount of documentation required, perceiving it as time-consuming and as detracting from direct work with service users (Boddy et al., 2012; Lillis et al., 2020; Waller, 2000). When writing is primarily driven by accountability demands, it may become 'defensive,' prioritizing compliance with organizational requirements over the needs of service users (Rai et al., 2025).

This highlights the need to create educational spaces where writing is taught not merely as a technical skill but as a practice that supports ethical, reflective, and political engagement, especially as students develop their professional identity (Author, 2024; Bertotti & Merlini, 2009; Björktomta & Tham, 2024; Rai & Lillis, 2013). However, although attention to professional writing has increased in the academic social work debate, it is not systematically reflected in practice and education (Björktomta & Tham, 2024; Lillis & Leedham, 2024; Lillis et al., 2020; Rai et al., 2025; Roose et al., 2009; Thompson, 2021).

Despite this limited recognition in educational settings, the consensus in the literature on the need to consider writing as a reflective and critical practice is growing; professional writing and reporting are considered a core component of the profession and a 'key site' (Lillis & Leedham, 2024, p. 1) for professional identity and practice (Author, 2024; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). In this sense, writing represents a fundamental moment in the development of critical thinking, reflexivity, and the identity of future social workers (Bertotti & Merlini, 2009; Rai, 2004). At the same

time, professional writing takes shape in a multiplicity of genres—such as reports, minutes, and intervention plans—which not only document practice but actively construct its meaning and the relationships between professionals, institutions, and service users (Leedham et al., 2020; Raineri & Landi, 2023). From this perspective, writing can be understood as a socially and culturally situated communicative activity even though it often remains a 'central whilst invisible' activity in everyday practice (Lillis, 2023, p. 6). As such, professional writing involves making choices about how situations, people, and actions are represented, entailing responsibility for how professional narratives are constructed. Written discourse not only reflects but actively shapes social reality, making language a site of power and ethical responsibility (Clapton, 2018; Heffernan, 2006; Raineri & Landi, 2023; Taylor & White, 2000). Reports are not neutral documents; they can have a direct impact on people's lives, raising ethical dilemmas related to confidentiality, the duty to inform third parties, and the potential for stigmatization (Cortés García et al., 2024)

In this context, professional writing is not simply a matter of 'writing well,' but of learning to read and rewrite social reality consciously, with attention to the ethical implications and power dynamics inherent in professional communication (Bertotti & Merlini, 2009; Lillis et al., 2020; Roose et al., 2009). Writing in social work involves much more than keeping an accurate record of facts: it is a 'high-stakes' activity, as life-changing decisions often rely on documents such as assessments and court reports (Rai et al., 2025). Through written texts, social workers enact their practice, drawing on professional training and judgment.

This implies that social work students are required to develop competencies that go beyond basic technical writing skills. However, the ethical and political dimensions of writing often prove difficult to grasp (Author, 2024; Björktomta & Tham, 2024; Rai, 2004). This may also be partly linked to the pressure exerted by neoliberal educational models, which emphasize measurable and immediate skills (Thompson, 2022).

One response to this trend is to introduce activities that encourage critical reading of professional language and integrate writing and reflection into professional practice. In this way, writing becomes a bridge between theory, ethics, and practice, providing a space for reflection and ethical responsibility (Author, 2024; Björktomta & Tham, 2024). Teaching and learning writing should be characterized by supporting students in integrating theory and practice, and by understanding the interrelationship between awareness of professional writing responsibilities, implementing the values and principles of social work in writing, and acquiring writing competence, rhetoric, and techniques for effective communication (Björktomta & Tham, 2024; McDonald et al., 2015).

In educational settings, writing is often treated as an accessory skill, confined to isolated courses that remain disconnected from the broader curriculum (Author, 2024; Rai & Lillis, 2013). However, several authors advocate for a more integrated approach, in which writing becomes a transversal element embedded across different areas of teaching (Luna et al., 2014). Only in this way is it possible to make students perceive writing as a meaningful practice anchored in professional reality (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Collaborative learning models, based on exercises, peer feedback, and reflective revision, have proven particularly effective in supporting the development of writing in social work. The experiences of intensive courses or writing workshops, if well integrated into the curriculum, promote the acquisition of linguistic and conceptual tools that allow

professionals to face the challenges of social work with greater awareness, even on an emotional and relational level (Gibbs, 2013; Lillis, 2017; Rai, 2004).

The trend toward 'competency-based education,' as promoted by neoliberal paradigms, needs to be countered by an educational approach that values the complexity, subjectivity, and ethical responsibility of social intervention (Rossiter & Heron, 2011). The teaching of professional writing can become, in this sense, a critical space to counteract the technicist drift and restore centrality to the transformative dimension of social work education (Roets et al., 2017; Thompson, 2021).

In the Italian context specifically, writing continues to occupy a rather marginal place in social work education. This is partly because, beyond very general curriculum requirements defined at the national level, Italian universities hold a high degree of autonomy in designing their social work education curricula. Given that no common core curriculum in social work has been established, each university can decide how much space to devote to specific subjects, which results in significant variation in the extent to which social work theory, ethics, and practice learning are coherently integrated (Bertotti, 2021; Fazzi & Rosignoli, 2020). The ministerial regulations only set minimum credit requirements while leaving broad discretionary power to universities, with the outcome that programs differ widely in structure, denomination, and disciplinary balance. In some cases, students may complete a degree in social work with only a few compulsory exams in core professional subjects, and the weight of the curriculum is largely shaped by the dominant disciplines within each department. This fragmentation contributes to the marginalization of the core professional dimensions of social work education, such as professional writing. Similarly, research in other contexts has shown that requirements and guidance on writing in the social work curriculum remain imprecise and that students may not encounter or have the opportunity to develop the full range of practice-based writing tasks until after qualification (Rai & Lillis, 2013; Rai et al., 2025). Moreover, professional reports remain under-researched and insufficiently addressed in social work education, leaving practitioners to rely on inadequate tools and limited training (Cortés García et al., 2024).

Against this background, writing in social work emerges as a powerful means for constructing meaning, ethical positioning, professional relationships, and identity. For this awareness to be effectively translated into practice, professional writing must be systematically and transversally incorporated into educational pathways, creating spaces for practice, reflection, and collective discussion in which future social workers can engage with their own perspectives, responsibilities, and ideas of social justice.

The current study

The research involved students and lecturers from a social work bachelor's degree program at two universities in Northern Italy. Participants engaged in training activities focused on professional writing during the academic years 2022/23, 2023/24, and 2024/25. Three of the four lecturers involved in the research are also the authors of this article; all lecturers involved in the focus group have gained professional experience as social workers in different practice fields. This has enabled a multifaceted perspective on the topic of professional writing to be developed over time, informed by different points of view and experiences, as social work researchers,

practitioners, and educators. This multifaceted approach is considered an added value, and the methodology section describes the measures adopted to reduce the bias of self-referentiality in the study.

To contextualize the research results, it is helpful to provide a brief description of the teaching activities covered by the study, as these differ in some respects. At one of the two universities involved, professional writing training consists of a 15-hour elective course offered in parallel and with the same content at the two university campuses. This course is aimed at three groups of approximately 20 students from different years (second and third) each year, with two groups studying at one campus and one group studying at the other campus.

At the second university, the research focused on two activities dedicated to writing. First, writing is a mandatory part of the social work methodology program for all second-year social work students, as it is presented as one of the professional tools of social workers. The second activity is a mandatory teaching module offered as a workshop. It focuses on social work in the context of juvenile criminal justice and child protection services. This activity addresses the specific features of social reports produced in these contexts. Depending on their progress, students participate in this second activity at different stages of their studies: it comprises a mix of second- and third-year students.

Learning activities on social report writing are elective at one university and mandatory at the other. In the first case, students choose an activity dedicated exclusively to this topic. In the second case, the topic is addressed within the context of broader educational activities, with writing being one of the specific topics. However, both universities address the topic during the years in which the students undertake their practice placement, thus not in the first year. This aspect is important because writing social reports necessitates a high level of integration between theory and practice for effective learning.

The teaching activities at both universities are similar in content. They include theoretical lessons on writing, focusing on the ethical aspects of language; critical analysis of reports proposed by teachers and sourced from social services; and student text production, either as exercises or as a final assignment. The most significant difference between the teaching activities is how students gain experience of using writing when interacting with service users. In one instance, students simulate reading a report provided by teachers and originating from a service in an interview situation, using role play. They prepare for this activity in small groups, reflecting on the proposed text and identifying with the persons involved in the simulation. This enables them to understand critical sections of the text and ethical issues from different perspectives and to anticipate how these might be addressed during the interviews. This activity encourages reflection on sharing written reports with those involved and explores the ethical implications of writing. It also enables students to experience this in a practical situation. To achieve the same aim, an expert by experience was involved at the other university, providing each student with the opportunity to learn directly from the experience of service users. Students are tasked with producing a text describing a specific situation (e.g. activating or requesting a service) and in a second meeting, the student submits this draft to the expert by experience, asking the expert for help with correcting, integrating, and editing the text. The aim is for the student and the expert by experience to work together to create the final text using a co-construction approach to writing.

Methodology

The research examined the teaching and learning experience of professional writing from the perspectives of students and social work lecturers. The aim was to explore how students and lecturers perceive and experience the teaching and learning of professional writing, and what challenges emerge from these educational practices. To this end, a mixed methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data.

The students and respective lecturers from the two universities who attended the described activities in the last three academic years were involved. The study was conducted between June 2023 and March 2025.

The students' points of view were investigated by conducting a self-completion questionnaire (Bryman & Becker, 2012; Park, 2012), distributed by e-mail at the end of the teaching activities. To ensure voluntary participation, it was clearly stated that it was intended for research purposes only and not for course evaluation. The questionnaire was chosen to reach the target population while guaranteeing anonymity, as the invitation to participate was sent by the course lecturers. The survey was sent to all students via an institutional e-mail containing a link to an online platform and no personal data were collected. The questionnaire was sent to all 130 students who participated in writing activities across the three academic years (2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25). Seventy-seven students responded; thus, the sample was non-probabilistic because it was self-selected (Ashworth, 2012). Most of the respondents ($n = 67$) were aged between 20 and 25 years, with an average age of 24 years. Sixty-nine students identified as female, seven identified as male, and one selected the option 'I prefer not to answer.' To understand their pre-university training, they were asked to indicate the high or secondary school they attended: 59.7% of the respondents attended a high school, 28.6% a vocational school, and 10.4% a technical school. One respondent came from a master's degree course prior to the current university course.

To investigate the teachers' point of view, a focus group was conducted (Bloor et al., 2002; Smithson, 2012; Zammuner, 2003) to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the topic and produce a discussion that would allow for a comparison of participants' perceptions of the critical issues and strengths associated with teaching writing. The focus group was attended by the four teachers involved in the teaching activities. All of them are social workers who have worked or still work in the services.

Although smaller than a standard focus group, the literature acknowledges that this format can be beneficial when the aim is to facilitate in-depth discussion with experts (Zammuner, 2003) or when participants have extensive knowledge of the topic to share (Krueger, 2014) leading some authors to refer to such groups as 'mini-focus groups' (Bloor et al., 2002; Krueger, 2014; Zammuner, 2003). The literature also acknowledges that the composition of the group may be predetermined, with the sample size determined by the scope of the study (Bezzi, 2013), as was the case here where the number of participants was fixed from the outset, as all teaching staff involved in the activities were included.

As mentioned, three of the four lecturers involved in the focus group are also the researchers and authors of this article. It was decided that a researcher colleague from outside the project, who is an expert on writing from a research perspective, should conduct the focus group. Additionally, she was asked to create an outline of the focus

group based on the proposed research questions. She was also provided with the structure of the questionnaire that was distributed to students. Having an external person prepare and facilitate the focus group allowed the authors of this article to engage in dialogue with the fourth participant within a free exchange centered on the teaching experience. This enabled them to detach themselves from the research purposes for which the focus group was conducted.

We then conducted a descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data (Cramer, 2012), as the number of survey responses and the type of information they provided did not allow for a more complex analysis, as will emerge from the presentation of the findings. The focus group transcription was subject to thematic content analysis using MAXQDA 24 Analytic Pro software (G. R. Gibbs, 2012; Smithson, 2012). To ensure that the thematic analysis was grounded in the data, and to avoid introducing personal interpretations as a result of their dual role as participants and researchers, each researcher carried out separate phases of data read-back.

Explicit informed consent was obtained from all participants for the anonymous collection and use of their data for research purposes. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent at any time with no consequences. They were also invited to express any concerns or request clarification regarding the lecturers' dual role as teachers and researchers.

Findings

Students' perspectives

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section contained introductory questions designed to collect demographic and personal details (the results of these questions are described in the section on respondents). The second section contained questions relating to perceptions of the usefulness and effectiveness of the teaching program, including their consistency with the practice placement experience: these questions used both Likert scales and optional open-ended fields where students could provide examples or explain their answers. The third section contained questions regarding the perceived importance and practicality of the methodological guidance learnt during the teaching activity. In the last section, the students were asked two open-ended questions: one about how the teaching program could be improved, and one about whether any of the expected topics had been omitted. Here, we present the main findings related to the second and third sections. Regarding the results from the fourth section, we note only that the suggestions received concerning the teaching proposal mostly relate to the need for more time for independent laboratory work and writing practice.

Perceived effectiveness and outcomes of teaching methods

Regarding the perceived effectiveness of the teaching methods, students were asked to rate each of the following activities on a Likert scale (from 'not at all useful' to 'very useful'): lectures, report analysis, self-writing exercises, simulations/role plays, the study of materials, and activities with experts by experience. The scale included a 'not applicable' option for activities that were not applicable to both universities.

The study of materials and simulations/role plays were rated as not very useful (13 and 9 responses, respectively), followed by lectures (5 responses) and report analysis (3 responses). None of the students considered the independent writing exercises and activities with experts by experience to be of little or no use. Report analysis was considered the most useful learning activity (53 replies 'very useful' and 28 replies 'useful'), followed by activities with experts by experience, if available (36 replies 'very useful' and 15 replies 'useful'), and self-writing exercises (51 replies 'very useful' and 19 replies 'useful'). By contrast, lectures received 35 'useful' responses, indicating that they were appreciated but perceived as less effective than the more workshop-based activities.

In terms of the effectiveness of the teaching activity, students were asked to express their opinion using a Likert scale (ranging from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree') to evaluate their satisfaction with the initial expectations that had been set, the improvement in their writing competence, their understanding of the ethical aspects related to professional writing, and their sense of greater proficiency in social report writing. Most respondents expressed satisfaction with the activity in relation to their initial expectations (54 responses of 'agree' and 'completely agree,' and 10 responses of 'disagree' and 'completely disagree') and felt that they had acquired skills (48 responses of 'agree' and 'completely agree,' and 12 responses of 'disagree' and 'completely disagree'). These responses are consistent with those regarding an improvement in their ability to write social reports. An item relating to self-perception was explored: '*by the end of the course, I felt much more confident in my ability to write a social report'*. There were 51 responses of 'agree' or 'completely agree,' and 11 responses of 'disagree' or 'completely disagree.'

Students were also given the opportunity to describe the skills they had acquired in a written response. The responses (52) contain more general observations on students' developing greater confidence and knowledge in professional writing, with some highlighting specific aspects of professional writing that can be divided into formal elements (which provide the foundation for what is written) and skills related to the practice of writing in the broadest sense. Examples of the first category include 'knowing how to start a relationship,' 'understanding a report's structure,' 'being familiar with different types of report and their purposes,' and 'identifying the fundamental elements of a social report.' Examples of the second category include statements as 'a greater awareness of the responsibilities involved in writing'; 'the ability to communicate effectively using short sentences and appropriate vocabulary'; 'applying ethical principles in writing'; 'an awareness of the ethical implications'; 'learning the values that must be upheld.' So, interestingly, when describing what they had learnt, some students emphasized the importance of ethical considerations in the teaching approach.

The questionnaire included a specific item designed to gather students' views on learning about the ethical implications of writing. Fifty-six participants responded positively to the dedicated question, indicating that they found the teaching activity helpful in understanding the ethical implications of writing. Seventeen selected the neutral option on the scale, while eight disagreed with the statement.

In the free text section on acquired competence, some respondents highlighted the knowledge they had acquired regarding the ethical implications of writing. Examples included 'the values to be respected,' 'responsibility,' and 'how to apply ethical principles in writing.'

Perception of the usefulness and practicality of methodological guidance and consistency with the practice placement experience

Responses to questions about students' opinions on specific methodological guidance implemented during teaching activities were examined to facilitate comparison. Students were asked to rate the importance of each guidance and then to indicate which they found the most challenging to implement. Both questions were answered by 76 students. The results for each guidance are shown in Table 1: the table provides a side-by-side overview of the response percentages to the two questions, indicating the significance of each item and the difficulty of implementation.

From Table 1, the guidance considered most relevant by the respondents is to include people's point of view, but this is not among the indications considered most difficult to implement in practice. Selecting information that is consistent with the purpose of the text is considered significant, but it is also the most difficult guidance to implement in professional practice. Another interesting point is that several respondents identified the use of non-judgmental language as important and easy to implement. Regarding the avoidance of impersonal forms, it emerges as difficult to implement in services but not as significant as the others. Finally, most respondents do not consider reading report to service users to be significant, and it ranks fourth among the most difficult guidance to implement.

The responses regarding the methodological guidance may be linked to what students observed during their practice placement, because not all students have had the opportunity to observe the writing process in action, nor have they experienced consistency between teaching in the classroom and the work of practitioners in the field.

Using a Likert scale, students were asked to rate their perceived coherence between their theoretical studies and their practice placement experience. Forty-six students answered positively, 16 neither agreed nor disagreed, and 15 answered negatively, perceiving a discrepancy between classroom learning and practical experience.

This aspect was also investigated using a text box in the questionnaire, in which students were asked to comment on their choice of response on the scale. The textual responses ($n = 47$) were thematically analyzed. Some students indicated that they could not assess this aspect: in some cases, they had not yet started their placement, and in others, writing had not formed part of their work, either as a practical activity (e.g. writing drafts of reports or minutes) or as an analytic activity (e.g. reading reports written

Table 1. Students' opinions on methodological guidance.

Methodological guidance	Percentage of students who considered it significant	Percentage of students who found it difficult to put it into practice
People's point of view should be included	35.5	11.8
Highlight the positive	7.9	7.9
Avoid impersonal forms	2.6	26.3
Use non-judgemental language	23.7	6.6
Describe contextual elements, and not just people	5.3	3.9
Select the information relevant to the purpose of the report	23.7	31.6
The report should be read by the persons concerned	3.9	9.2

by the supervisor). By contrast, some students applied the guidance provided during the workshop firsthand when their supervisors requested them to write a first draft report. Only one student explicitly attributed the difference between classroom instructions and observed practice to the organization, which provides a pre-set structure for written texts. Regarding the differences identified by the students, one consideration highlights the experience of the practitioners as a relevant factor: 'In the fieldwork observed during the practical traineeship, social workers use their own method, which is appropriate given the importance of experience, and this method can also overturn some of the main points given during lessons.' The student did not make any critical reference to this 'overturning.'

Lecturers' perspectives[1]

The focus group with the four lecturers involved in the educational activities highlighted several key challenges in teaching professional writing within social work bachelor's degree programs. These challenges relate to the following areas: students' expectations, the perceived differences in how teachers approach the teaching of writing and the provision of models of good practice, fragmented educational provision, the influence of organizational culture on individual practitioners' writing, basic linguistic skills, and the need for a shared approach to writing education.

Students' expectations vs. educational aims

Lecturers reported that students often approach writing courses expecting to acquire technical skills, such as predefined formats, objective language, and set formulas. Although this expectation is understandable, it conflicts with the intended learning outcomes of the courses, which promote a reflective, ethical, and context-sensitive approach to writing. As lecturers stated, students arrive 'with a very strong expectation of learning to write in the most technical and objective way possible' (Lect2) and are often 'searching for certainties, for "how to do the task"' (Lect4). This approach can lead to frustration because, rather than meeting this expectation, the teaching proposal encourages students to critically analyze the language typically used in professional writing, revealing the implicit representations and ethical implications embedded within it. Lect1 added: 'The expectation is that you learn to write reports, but then they struggle to connect the methodological and ethical guidance we provide with the practical act of writing.' This approach can lead to frustration, especially when the teaching proposal, rather than satisfying this expectation, invites students to critically examine the language typically used in constructing professional texts, making visible the implicit representations and ethical implications embedded in written work.

The influence of organizational cultures within services further complicates the picture. Teaching professional writing requires consideration of the organizational context in which practitioners' texts are composed. As Lect3 observed, 'each professional and the service culture they belong to influence how they view problems [. . .].' Institutional settings profoundly shape professional practices and representations. Supervisors often transmit normative models that reflect their service's mission, which can result in prescriptive formats that are viewed as service outputs, leaving little space for critical reflection. This results in a tension between two conceptions of

writing emerging from the lecturers' considerations: as the documentation of a reflective professional thinking-doing—an articulation of assessment, decision-making, and action grounded in ethical and methodological awareness; as an administrative task, driven by organizational accountability and bureaucratic compliance. The lecturers observed, also through students' fieldwork experiences, that many practitioners tend to adopt the latter model, viewing writing primarily as a reporting obligation, rather than as a site of negotiation or responsibility. As such, according to the lecturers' opinion, students may enter services where writing is disconnected from dialogic processes and reduced to a format to be completed, thus hindering the development of critical writing skills and weakening their ability to construct a coherent professional voice.

Academic teaching vs. practice-based experience

The discrepancy between expectations and educational content becomes more evident when students undertake internships in social work services. A recurring issue is the discrepancy between classroom teaching and professional practice. Students often adopt the models observed in the field, even when these contradict what they have learnt at university, because internship supervisors are seen as highly authoritative. As Lect4 noted, 'their certainties collapse' when faced with the discrepancy between the 'bureaucratic culture of writing within the services' and the approach proposed in class. Lect3 reported that some students expressed disappointment: 'They told me explicitly, "you taught us things that we didn't find in practice."' Lect4 further reflected: 'They bring their uncertainty into the field and often look for someone to tell them exactly how things should be done. But the field also offers different and sometimes contradictory ways of doing things.' This observation captures a fundamental ambiguity in the students' learning trajectory: rather than encountering a single coherent model to follow, they are faced with a plurality of scripts, expectations, and writing styles, most of which remain implicit. The lecturers noted that such diversity is rarely made visible or discussed with students, who are left to interpret and absorb it without proper tool. In this sense, the contradiction between models is not only a cognitive challenge but also a potential source of disorientation and disengagement. Some students, as noted in both the focus group and individual reflections, respond with confusion or even withdrawal; others adapt pragmatically, emulating what seems most efficient in the short term, often at the expense of ethical or critical awareness.

These observations reinforce the idea that students cannot always be expected to integrate the two learning environments independently, given the complexity of the task and their early stage of professional development.

Writing as relational and situated practice

The lecturers observed that, among the issues raised by the gap between academic and practice-based teaching, writing is often portrayed as a solitary task. However, the teaching experiences and intentions shared during the focus group suggest that writing can also be a relational means. This can be achieved through dialogue with service users, for example, by asking whether they feel represented, acknowledging divergences between professional and personal perspectives, and sharing content not only for administrative transparency but also as a gesture of professional accountability. As Lect4

emphasized: 'The idea of writing as a solitary act is misleading: it's embedded in relationships and power dynamics, and this must be made visible to students.'

Making these dimensions visible means first recognizing that writing is never neutral: it constructs, positions, and frames both the subject of the report and the professional who writes it. Lecturers emphasized the importance of helping students identify whose voice is being amplified, whose is being silenced, and what assumptions are embedded in the narrative form and language chosen. This type of reflective approach allows writing to become a site of ethical awareness and professional positioning, rather than a purely technical task.

Fragmented educational provision

Another key issue that was discussed was the fragmentation of writing education. Lect1 observed: 'We should ask ourselves what kind of cultural project on writing we are sustaining in our university, even unconsciously. Different teaching moments carry different messages about writing, but we rarely stop to ask if they are coherent.' Some courses are optional and time-limited, whereas others form parts of broader modules. This fragmented structure undermines the perception of writing as a core professional skill. 'It is a limited educational offering, a small piece. It risks remaining marginal' (Lect2). Lecturers advocated a transversal and longitudinal integration of writing into the curriculum, providing students with opportunities to revisit and deepen their understanding after gaining field experience. The outcome of the discussion was that writing skills require time to develop and cannot be cultivated in a single course, regardless of its length or structure.

Furthermore, lecturers indicated that a coherent and sustained approach to writing education cannot depend solely on individual course initiatives: it calls for a broader consensus and an active alliance between teaching staff and program coordinators to embed writing as a shared pedagogical responsibility across the curriculum.

Basic writing skills and institutional expectations

In addition to the ethical and methodological issues, lecturers reported that students were having widespread difficulties with writing correctly and coherently in their native language. Grammar and spelling errors are common and compromise clarity of expression: 'There is a general lack of mastery of writing, and of Italian in particular' (Lect2). These challenges hinder students' ability to engage with more advanced aspects of linguistic responsibility. The lack of writing competence is also a recurring issue in feedback that services provide to universities regarding student preparation. There is an implicit institutional expectation that students should know how to write correctly in Italian. However, lecturers in the focus group indicated that, while this expectation is legitimate, it often exceeds what universities can realistically ensure because students' basic writing skills should be developed before they start university. Although many IT tools are now available to help with writing, even for those with a lower skill-level or who find it difficult to produce effective written texts—such as automatic spell-checking and artificial intelligence—we believe that social workers' texts require a high level of awareness of linguistic construction due to their nature and purpose; therefore, having good writing skills is important for producing professional, ethical, and effective writing. For instance, when teachers talk to their students about objectivity, they help them

understand the difference between facts and opinions. In written text, this distinction is embodied by sentence construction that clearly indicates whether the writer is expressing an opinion or reporting an event. Such awareness, demonstrated through linguistic choices, cannot be achieved with IT support alone.

In conclusion, the lecturers emphasized the need to cultivate a shared approach to writing education that moves beyond fragmented methods and recognizes writing as a critical and cross-disciplinary professional skill. As Lect3 suggested, 'Perhaps we should ask ourselves what kind of cultural project we are sustaining within this university in terms of professional writing.' This also interrogates the broader cultural project of professional education underpinning social work education.

Discussion

The complexities that emerged from the research on teaching professional writing from the perspectives of students and teachers highlight the need to question how this competence can be developed in the field of social work. The findings confirm that although students perceive professional writing as important, they find its integration into practice difficult, particularly in an internship setting (Cortés García et al., 2024; Rai et al., 2025). A discrepancy between students' expectations of learning to write as a technical skill and the educational approach of teaching writing as a critical, reflective, and relational competence has been found.

Looking at the results, this is particularly evident in relation to two aspects. First, students' perception of theoretical content as useful but not essential suggests that they may not consider it a necessary component of developing their professional writing competence. This idea is not coherent with the theoretical framework offered by the lecturers because professional writing, like other professional competence, can be developed through different approaches. A methodological framework can significantly impact how professional means are used by practitioners and their potential to empower and enable participation. This perception, as indicated by the questionnaire, may be linked to theoretical content that is not readily applicable in practice, for instance, reflecting on the power of language to construct representations of reality and how this constitutes a form of professional power. The credibility of the issues raised in such narratives can vary in the eyes of report recipients, partly because of cultural representations and broader dynamics of social power.

Second, most students did not consider sharing reports with users to be significant, although it received significant attention in class through activities such as role playing and expert-by-experience involvement; it was also not perceived as difficult to put into practice. Regarding this point, which raised the most questions for us among the results, most students stated during lessons on this topic that reading social reports to service users is not a common practice in the services where they did their internships. This discrepancy between what was learnt in the classroom and what was observed during the internship could impact the effectiveness of the teaching.

Thus, students often see writing-related activities that are not strictly technical as less relevant, and this is not only linked to students' expectations: this belief is often reinforced by the perceived expectations of students' abilities in internship settings, as expressed by supervisors and organizations. Field training has historically been

considered a key element in effectively teaching social work, as set out in the literature on social work education (Dick et al., 2002; Wayne et al., 2010). In Italy, due to the fragmentation of social work education discussed in the background section, a standardized model of internships has not been established. This means that field experience is accompanied by different approaches, depending on the organizational context, the professional involved, and even the university (Raineri, 2015). Students often view internships as a form of 'instructive' training, considering the approaches and practices of professionals to be as important a part of the learning process as the theoretical content, since they represent the 'real world.' In an 'imitative' approach, students learn by reproducing behaviors and actions while receiving guidance on how to act. This entails a risk, however, that they may prioritize the demands of professional contexts over those of academic settings. Therefore, students immersed in this experience should be encouraged to recognize that their internship will not provide them with all the knowledge they need and that they do not have to reproduce everything they see, while also encouraging them to take a critical view of the practice (Raineri, 2015). These field-based tensions further highlight the need for dedicated spaces within academic training where such divergences can be critically explored, enabling students to position themselves actively rather than conform passively.

In this sense, lecturers face additional difficulties in challenging students' ideas about writing as merely a technical skill without building stronger links between universities and the professional community. This alliance would involve teachers and professionals sharing goals and principles to nurture the transformative value of writing in shaping professional identity and to promote an understanding of writing as a core dimension of professional practice. Therefore, professional writing should be structurally integrated into internship activities, enabling students to gain firsthand experience in its use, as with other professional competencies, and to more effectively connect their field experiences with their academic learning.

To strengthen this alliance, students' feedback on their practical experiences within services must be considered, as it highlights the importance of raising awareness and promoting continuous training for professionals on the subject of professional writing. Promoting a broader understanding of professional writing as a space for reflection, ethics, and dialogue is essential for shaping social workers who are critically engaged and responsible. This awareness cannot be taken for granted, even among professionals, as professional writing competence, like other social work competencies, requires various times and spaces and cannot be developed in the university setting alone. Therefore, although writing must be addressed consistently and organically as part of the wider educational program, newly qualified professionals should be able to continue to develop their professional writing competence after they enter social work practice. Understanding the ethical implications of language and using writing as a means of engaging with those involved in care are not aims that can be achieved quickly. Rather, they constitute an enduring professional challenge, the consolidation of which is possible only through continuous and reflexive practice. Therefore, including professional writing in continuing education programs for social workers is essential, as it is a vital skill for those working in the field.

Recognizing writing as a professional, reflective, and critical act can facilitate the integration of theory and practice, thereby contributing to students' development of

professional competence and a sense of responsibility (Author, 2024). Such integration is essential to support students in developing the sensitivity and awareness needed to understand the role of writing in daily practice (Lillis, 2023; Lillis et al., 2020; Roose et al., 2009; Thompson, 2021).

Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be noted. The first one concerns the dual role of the lecturers and authors, which may have introduced potential biases in data collection and interpretation. To mitigate this risk, efforts were made to engage in collegial discussions, for instance by involving external colleagues in the facilitation of the focus group, and by sharing data and preliminary analyses with colleagues throughout the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). A second limitation relates to the restricted scope of the study, which draws on only two universities. This narrow focus inevitably limits the generalizability of the findings, which should be regarded as exploratory rather than representative.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the relevance of professional writing as a reflective, ethical, and political act that remains underdeveloped in social work education. Beyond confirming students' difficulties in integrating writing into practice and lecturers' calls for a more coherent approach, the findings identify broader implications. For social work education, they highlight the need to embed writing across curricula, linking classroom teaching with fieldwork in a systematic way and strengthening collaboration between universities and services. For professional practice, they emphasize the importance of continuous training that frames writing as a site of responsibility, dialogue, and critical engagement even in the face of the growing diffusion of AI-based writing tools. This study did not specifically address the use of AI-based writing tools in social work education. At the time of accessing the field and collecting data, such practices were not widespread in the teaching activities under study, so they were not explicitly explored. Consequently, this aspect could not be analyzed in depth, but it represents a crucial area for future research.

Moving beyond a narrow conception of writing as a technical competence is crucial, as it challenges the underlying vision of social work: whether it is reduced to a set of skills or understood as a reflective and political practice engaging with the complexity of social realities.

Note

1. In what follows, *Lect1, Lect2, Lect3*, and *Lect4* correspond to lecturers involved in the study.

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