

Written communication assessment 2016-17

The group members all received the report compiled for WASC and Patricia Patrick's initial response. The group was asked to respond to any aspect of their experience including artifacts, findings, and construction of the rubric. They were invited to make suggestions for the future. The first section of the report includes the aspects that attracted the most discussion.

Composition of the the team:

Team members found it both helpful and challenging to work with members from different disciplines and different kinds of experience. Having a varied team may have contributed to scoring discrepancies. On the other hand, the experience of working as a team and discussing our approaches may also have enabled us to balance out the way our backgrounds dispose us to appreciate writing differences because we discussed our different approaches to scoring during the norming session.

As we continue to work as a group will allow to work through some of our different perspectives, and to gain more experience. If we continue to evaluate science essays, for instance, Patricia would make sure that the team evaluates more of these as a group so that the science professors instruct us in evaluating scientific evidence.

Working as members with diverse backgrounds also had some positive effects on our personal teaching. Aaron especially found his experience helpful in developing better writing standards for his classes. His comments about how assessment can help us develop university-wide standards were especially thought-provoking.

Marynelle and Patricia both thought that some readers are just more likely to disagree and that having the same pair read a number of papers might not improve inter-rater reliability.

Choice of artifacts:

One question was whether GE work or work in the major is the best source of information, Marynelle suggested more 200 and 400-level artifacts because non-GE assignments will show students at their most engaged. On the other hand, Mike thought that middle-of-the-road, more generally representative artifacts would be better. Patricia wonders if we might include department's own evaluation of their senior work in university assessment. Participating in two departmental assessment this year, Patricia thought that one challenge here of course would be differences in rubrics. However, there were also parallel criteria and perhaps department should be thinking about aligning their assessment more with university rubrics.

Evaluating some of the essays was a challenge because they were somewhat outside of the experience of group members. For instance, the 201 essays on children's literature are valuable for that course and develop important capabilities; however, their approach was something we had not anticipated and found difficult to evaluate.

Difference between sophomores and seniors:

Marynelle raised the thought-provoking possibility of following individual students.

Patricia wonders why we did not use freshman writing (Maybe not enough material?) and whether the 315 material all came from seniors. On future concern is that the new GE program will mean that neither GE 110 or English 201 will be required; thus, our students in 315 will have less writing experience.

Individual Responses

Response by Marynelle Chew

Differences between sophomores and seniors

Another reason may be that we are not following a cohort. It may be more revealing to follow specific student's progress from sophomore to senior rather than a random set of each. This would, of course, necessitate curricula changes so that writing artifacts would be present at both levels in the majors and minors.

Inter-Rater Reliability

I do not think readers should read in assigned pairs. Some pairs will never agree and will always result in a third read. Rather than waste everyone's time, all readings should be assigned to random pairs. I have no idea if that is a statistically sound practice, however. I also wonder if rather than having inexperienced readers (i.e. those from disciplines where papers are not assigned) and experienced readers, it would be more efficient to enlist those who are already more familiar with reading and grading student written work. Might these readers not already have a common understanding and expectation of writing and result in higher inter-rater reliability?

Rubric Adjustments : Figure 1

The two rubrics are substantially different, as was the method of rating the papers. I wonder if the results were apples and oranges?

Artifacts

With the new academic programs coming online, might it be more appropriate to select artifacts at the 200 and 400 levels from within those courses of study rather than GE artifacts? Many students are not invested in GE, but one hopes that they will be more interested in their major and minor courses of study that will speak to their passions.

Response by Aaron Curtis

I really enjoyed my experience as a member of the team. I thought it was good to have a cross-disciplinary team and to hear how others approached the assessment of student's written work. The exercise also prompted me to increase the amount of writing in my courses this semester. I gained insights into the value of supporting this learning outcome across the curriculum.

In light of that, I think it would be good to communicate with faculty what the university is aiming for in terms of written communication outcomes. Developing and sharing the rubric is a good start. But I think more can be done. If I had a sense of where students are supposed to be at in terms of their writing abilities coming out of ENGL 101 and ENGL 315 for example, I could work to build on and measure those abilities in my courses where appropriate as well.

Personally, as a teacher, I would love to have more training / support in creating, supporting, and assessing writing assignments. Historically, my assignments have looked like "write a 3-page paper about x. Cite y sources. Include three ideas about z. Reading and evaluating the range of papers we reviewed helped me see that more is possible and can be a key component of my department's program learning outcomes.

I think having us work on this project as a committee was helpful to me and helpful to the university. I think empowering faculty to evaluate our student's work in similar fashion, while appropriately sharing the results of that evaluation back to the assessment committee in a meaningful way, could be transformational.

Response by Mike Weber

1) I found it difficult to understand the papers from Sister Goodwill's classes - the papers dealing with

children's' books. On the other hand, I understood (and thoroughly enjoyed) the science papers. I wonder if this biased my scoring. Perhaps we should choose essays that are more "middle-of-the-road" (meaning no papers dealing with children's books and no science papers). Of course what is "middle-of-the-road" to me may not be what it is to someone else. Also, this may restrict the sample size so much that the essays do not represent the entire student body. I'm not sure; this deserves further discussion.

2) The rubric worked well and was easy to use. I am glad that we had practice using the rubric before we began the actual scoring because I had no baseline since I do not grade English papers.

3) I am glad that we had two short sessions rather than one long session. My brain was getting pretty tired after a few hours of carefully reading and evaluating essays. I gained a lot of respect for English teachers who spend hours and hours reading student papers.