

Written Communication: Developing

Define and Operationalize the Written Communication Core Competency at BYU-Hawaii

BYU-Hawaii's Institutional Learning Outcome for Communication reads, "Communicate effectively in written and oral form, using integrity, good logic and appropriate evidence." The conscious effort to teach and model effective writing has been part of the University's mission from the beginning, and many core classes in the GE curriculum have and continue to offer up written essays and research as the culminating achievements of the course (see appendix ?). In addition, many capstone courses in the humanities and sciences—such as the Biology 491–494 series and the Chemistry 491–494 series, and History 490 and English 490, for biology, chemistry, history, and English majors—make a polished, semi-professional writing project the gateway through which potential graduates must pass. Since WSCUC enshrined the Core Competencies in its most recent accreditation and review process, BYU-Hawaii has sent a variety of individuals to WASC trainings and seminars in the hopes that these faculty and staff members will spread their understanding of current best practices in assessment and program review, and take responsibility for building and managing assessment tools in the service of BYU-Hawaii's current and future students.

The Written Communication Core Competency Group (hereafter WC Group) was organized in fall 2015 and defined and operationalized the evaluation of the written communication core competency by developing a rubric in September and October 2015 (see appendix ?). Efforts were made to solicit participation and feedback across campus in developing the broad rubric to be used in assessing writing across the curriculum. The WC Group itself is composed of representatives from three out of the four colleges on campus, and the rubric produced is to be integrated in ongoing program assessments and course development. The rubric consists of the following four criteria, here with an accompanying description of what we aim (ideally) for each student to accomplish in their writing for that criteria (highly developed):

1. Content – Has a clear purpose and audience and accomplishes this purpose with effective and appropriate support.
2. Coherence – Flows from beginning to end using audience-friendly sequencing, transitions, and markers. Uses professional and appropriate layout and presentation.

3. Language Use – Uses a wide range of specific and appropriate language structures. May contain some minor errors that do not interfere with meaning.

4. Sources and Evidence – Uses evidence in clear and effective ways. Uses sources or referencing consistently and appropriately in a professional manner consistent with the content and discipline.

The skills levels of written communication mirror those encouraged by WSCUC: (1) initial, (2) emerging, (3) developing, and (4) highly developed.

Direct Evidence of Student Learning

For direct evidence of student learning, we look to the WC Group's pilot study of student papers from two required GE courses, English 201 (Literary Analysis and Research) and English 315 (Topics for Advanced Writing and Analysis). English 201 is generally taken at the sophomore level, and English 315 at the junior/senior level; as such, the hope of the Group was that English 201 would give them a representation of student writing at or near the Associates level, while English 315 would give them a representation of student writing at or near the Bachelors level. However, since some programs have their own substitute requirements for an advanced writing course (the equivalent of English 315), they also chose to look at papers from Biology 494, Chemistry 494, and History 490, in order to ensure as wide a sampling of student work as possible.

BYU-Hawaii's Institutional Research office (hereafter, IR) harvested student papers from Canvas, BYU-Hawaii's instructional technology software, and scrubbed them of any identifying information, while banking data on the gender, native language, country of origin, and college of each author. The WC Group then met several times, first to test the previously mentioned rubric with a smaller batch of papers in November 2015, and then again in January 2016 with a large batch of papers to conduct a full assessment of student work. The WC Group delivered its raw scores back to the IR, which then compiled, disaggregated, and summarized the data (see appendix ?).

Strengths of the Study

One strength of the WC Group's study is that English 201 and English 315 pull from the entire student body, making for a randomized sample across all student groups and not a self-selected group of students taking a class that requires a significant piece of writing. As indicated in the results summary prepared by IR (see appendix ?), the sample of 150 student artifacts is fairly representative of the proportion of degrees awarded (Associates vs Bachelors) and of the demographic of BYU-Hawaii's student population. Also, while taught by different instructors, the assignments in these two courses are quite similar from section to section, giving the writing sample a consistency with regards to audience, purpose, and length. This consistency is arguably advantageous when it comes to measuring the potential growth and development of student writing from the Associates to Bachelors level. Also, a final note on rater reliability: using the multiple ratings for the same artifact by different users, IR's analysis indicates that "there is a high internal consistency for each attribute" on the rubric, and especially the overall "holistic" score (see appendix ?).

Weaknesses of the Study

Potential problems with the WC Group's approach include the fact that some students may take English 201 earlier (as a freshman) or later (as a junior or even senior) than recommended, or taking English 315 earlier (as a sophomore) than recommended, and their sampling didn't account for those variations. Also, anecdotal reports from English faculty make the case that because some students see general education English courses as hurdles and unrelated to their true course of study, their final papers for those classes may be less a true sample of their best work, and more a calculated product of "good enough." Finally, in their attempt to supplement their English 315 sample with some missing student groups in the sciences and history, the Group took writing from true capstone courses with higher levels of student engagement and professor involvement, not a general randomized sample anymore but a sampling of work from students who likely view these projects as more directly related to their success as professionals and post-graduates, leading to the kind of effort and commitment that may be missing from many English 315 projects.

Results

The data generally supports the hope and expectation that student learning is taking place between the Associates and Bachelors level. The vast majority of artifacts surveyed at the associate's level—80-90 percent—were at the “emerging” or “developed” level in all four attribute categories on the rubric. At the bachelor's level, the number of artifacts scoring at the “highly developed” level jumped significantly, from 0-9 percent up to 15-27 percent. To be cautious, it is likely this number was at least slightly skewed by the biology, chemistry and history papers mentioned above, the majority of which exhibited “highly developed” qualities (artifacts from the College of Math and Sciences notably had the highest scores in all categories, according to IR's results summary in appendix ?).

Also, one may note that the highest percentage of student artifacts at both the Associates and Bachelors levels fall under “emerging.” According to Chart 1 in IR's results summary (see appendix ?), there was a small but measurable increase in the number of artifacts at either “developed” or “highly developed” levels from the Associates to the Bachelors level. The biggest increase was in the category of “Coherence,” which rose from only 30 percent at the “developed” or “highly developed” level to almost 50 percent. While this is encouraging—it would appear that a modest number of students are able to move from one level to the next by graduation—it is also somewhat worrying to note that just as many students may have made no progress at all. This is in keeping with the BYU-Hawaii English department's own ongoing, smaller-scale assessment of general education English papers, which tends to show little difference between the overall quality of work from English 201 and English 315.

Also notable, and expected, were the numbers showing significantly lower scores on artifacts from international and EIL students. However, more study and analysis is needed to isolate the rate of improvement and progress in these students' scores as they move from the University's EIL program, through English 101 and onward to the upper-level writing classes.

Indirect Evidence of Student Learning

In addition to direct assessment of student written communication, BYU-Hawaii uses the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Graduating Student Survey (GSS), and the

Alumni Questionnaire (AQ), which are self-reported tools, to accumulate data on perceived student capabilities.

The results of the NSSE 2013 (drawn from students enrolled in fall 2012 semester) related to written communication suggest that seniors graduating in the College of Human Development feel most strongly that their experience at BYU-Hawaii has helped them to write more clearly and effectively, followed by seniors in the Colleges of Language, Culture and Arts, Business and Government, and Math and Sciences respectively. Interestingly, the students coming out of the College of Math and Sciences gave the lowest ratings despite the senior papers from Biology and Chemistry having the consistently highest assessment scores, as mentioned above. It is also worth noting that international students rated their experiences in gaining writing skills higher than their domestic counterparts.

The results of the 2014 GSS (Graduating Student Survey) indicate that more than half of the graduating seniors, 64%, feel that they are able to effectively define the scope of a research question at a very good or excellent level; 65% think they are able to locate, evaluate, and use information at a very good or excellent level; 62% deem they are able to use critical thinking to analyze arguments at a very good or excellent level; and 63% report they are able to communicate effectively in both written and oral form at a very good or excellent level. This is rather remarkable, as is the fact that when we add the students who rated themselves at good or above, the numbers jump to over 90% for all four categories. If nothing else, we are seeing students who imagine themselves as being prepared to be effective communicators as they leave the university.

The AQ (Alumni Questionnaire) is taken three to four years after graduation. The most recent results are from the graduating class of 2011–2012; the information was collected in 2014–2015. Alumni report on a six-point scale. The average score reported by most students when asked about their ability to “communicate effectively in both written and oral form, using integrity, good logic, and appropriate evidence,” was 5.05, which corresponds to the “very good” level. Interestingly, the percentage of students who rated themselves at the “good” level or higher approximately corresponds to the percentage who did so on the 2014 GSS survey just mentioned.

While the differences are not statistically significant, it can be noted that out of four questions related to communication and information literacy, the question about the ability to communicate effectively in written form had the highest self-reported score. Also, on that question, IWork students, students from the College of Language, Culture and Arts, students who served missions for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, married students, and male students all reported higher ratings than their counterparts. In the case of IWork students, they consistently returned higher ratings in all categories than any other single group, warranting possible investigation into why these hard-working and mostly international students feel the way they do even several years after graduation.

Responses to Assessment Findings and Evaluation of Process

As BYU-Hawaii is just entering its first round of assessment review under WASC's newer system of core competencies, and still developing more relevant and robust pathways of assessment and program review, presentation and discussion of the most recent assessment findings are just beginning, are ongoing, and should be trickling through the future faculty discussions, especially our current and continuing evaluation of the university's GE program. However, the results of this last year's work is now being made available for review and discussion, and some initial responses are being clearly articulated.

First, as mentioned by the other BYU-Hawaii core competency groups (information literacy and oral communication) in their reports, adjustments and improvements should be sought with regards to our research and assessment methodology. Interested stakeholders need to ask themselves if measuring the lower and higher level GE writing classes is the best way of conducting this study. Strengths and weaknesses of this particular method are mentioned above under "Direct evidence of student learning." More time and effort needs to be spent examining other options, such focusing more on capstone projects across campus, or even a portfolio system like those adopted at other schools. Certainly, these methods require extra investigation into curriculum, coordination with a broader group of faculty, and more time and effort from assessment committee members. Whatever we do, more and better data is necessary. The current study's limitations are severe; yet, the hope is that the university community now at least has a baseline for future discussions and innovations in writing assessment

The WC Group also echoes the Information Literacy Group (IL) with regards to disaggregating the data further. For example, although the university categorizes students in the following “home areas”: Asia, Pacific, Hawaii, US Mainland, and Other International, this taxonomy is not helpful because it does not take into account the differences in the quality of education in different Asian countries. A more helpful breakdown might be: (1) Northeast Asia [Korea and Japan], (2) China [Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China], (4) Philippines, and (5) Malaysia and Indonesia, (6) Other [Mongolia, India, Cambodia, Vietnam, etc.].

We look forward to hearing the response from faculty in the various colleges and departments as they are re-introduced to the rubric alongside the data. While it is possible that many will view the results as general positive and “good enough,” we hope that a discussion will ensue about how really no graduating seniors should still be at the “emerging” or “initial” level of written communication. Faculty and administrators need to talk about how the heavy teaching loads at BYU-Hawaii tend to produce courses where less writing is required due to the time intensive nature of responding to written work. Already we have seen a trend towards less writing with the new GE 110 course, which replaced the writing intensive English 201. More than focusing on a single class, however, certainly there needs to be a frank appraisal of writing instruction across the curriculum as a whole. The decisions can’t be made by one committee or one administrator, there needs to be a larger forum, and hopefully the upcoming accreditation review will provide one.

The WC Group has only scratched the surface of how written communication is being taught and assessed at BYU-Hawaii, and recommends that individual programs adapt the rubric that the WC Group has created and run their own assessment studies that dig deeper into the kinds of writing students are doing in their majors. These results will shed light on the general results the WC Group has offered this time around, and help shape future university-wide assessments.

Measurement of Information Literacy Competency at or near Graduation

According to our current results, it is clear that the majority of BYU-Hawaii students at or near graduation are at the developed or highly developed level in their written communication,

according to our current rubric. The University's assessment of this core competency is more likely at the developing level, with a decent history of engagement but a need to refine and re-evaluate current practices.

Changes We Have Made in Response to These Data

As indicated in the reports from other groups, the University Assessment Committee seeks to maintain its heightened level of activity and work with the greater university community to solicit participation in gathering useful artifacts and data. Change has been slow but measurable as more and more people become acquainted with the latest research and recommendations regarding assessment practices and its focus on student learning.

As the University Assessment Committee reaches out, it will recommend in particular that programs align their current course curriculum with the university's goals for student writers, and seek to consciously reinforce the basic instruction that students receive in their English and GE courses. Initial investigation seems to indicate that some students take many upper-division courses without being asked to use the basic writing skills that they have acquired in their introductory courses.