

Memo

From: Mark Lencho
Member, *ad hoc* Committee on Writing Assessment for General Education
To: Steve Friedman
Chair, Ad Hoc General Education Writing Assessment Team
Re: Results from the Spring 2005 Writing Assessment
Date: July 29, 2005

- **Background**

The assessment of student writing from the spring, 2005 semester represents the sixth round of writing assessment aimed at evaluating the students' mastery of the set of objectives for the General Education Program at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Previous assessments have helped in the development and refinement of the rubric used for the current assessment, according to which we evaluate student writing in terms of the three primary traits "thinking," "voice," and "literacy."

What began in 1999 as the assessment of student writing in the General Education capstone course "World of Ideas" (WOI) was broadened in the spring of 2001 to include the assessment of short, impromptu writing from World of Ideas and Freshman English 101 (101). For the current assessment, the comparative dimension was developed a step further. For the second time, the assessment team evaluated term papers—sustained writing in the range of four to seven pages and incorporating research—from both 101 and 390, mixed together and all addressing similar topics. However, this time (like the fall 2004 assessment) the final writing assignment was fully integrated into the instruction that occurred over the course of the semester in both 101 and WOI. Thus, classroom activities during the semester served to support the writers in both courses, and, we hope, helped them "put their best foot forward" on the final writing assignment for the semester.

- **Collection Procedures**

The papers were gathered from the classes of one instructor who taught both 101 and WOI. This same instructor also helped students in both classes develop their papers on the same topic—a person that the student most admired. World of Idea sections are oriented around particular themes (e.g., "The Good Life," "Community," and "The Human Condition") so that the paper topic, in this case, was situated in the context of the individual's relationship to society, a core feature of "The Human Condition." In the end, we compiled two sets of 17 papers each—eight from 101 and nine from WOI. This represented a great improvement over previous attempts to compare 101 and WOI papers because now, at least on the face, the papers looked similar and were written on similar themes.

- **The Scoring Procedure**

Each set of 17 papers was scored by three raters. The papers were assigned a randomly generated number; none of the raters was aware of the origin—either 101 or WOI—of any of the papers. The raters were randomly assigned to two sets of papers. Thus, the general appearance of both 101 and WOI papers would be the same, and raters would not know immediately the origin of the paper, 101 or WOI.

- **Summary of the Data**

The rubric consists of six possible score where 1=fundamentally deficient, 2=seriously flawed, 3=limited, 4=adequate, 5=strong, and 6=outstanding. For all raters, the average scores across the three criteria, for the two sets of papers were:

101	WOI
Thinking=2.8	Thinking=3.5
Voice=3.1	Voice=3.6
Literacy=3.3	Literacy=3.4

101	WOI
Thinking=3.5	Thinking=4.3
Voice=2.7	Voice=3.3
Literacy=3.3	Literacy=4.0

- **Noteworthy**

Prior to the fall 2004 scoring, the average scores across criteria for 101 tended to be just below “limited” while those for WOI tended to be just above “limited”. The margin of improvement from 101 (freshman-level) to WOI (junior-level) was relatively small—about .3. These averages improve significantly for the fall 2004 scoring, and this appears to be the case for the current iteration. For 2004, we speculated that some of the improvement might be attributed to the new raters that were involved. After the 2004 scoring, the raters met to discuss the rubric and their ratings, which has long been part of the procedures for executing this assessment. Thus, it seems fair to assume that the raters were more “on the same page” this time compared to last, resulting in greater consistency across raters. The current averages for the 101 papers are just above “limited”, the improvement index has increased to the point where the WOI papers are solidly in between “limited” and “adequate”—quite similar to the 2004 results.

Raters Lencho, Longrie, Hogan, and Vincent attended a debriefing meeting after the current set of papers had been scored. George Savage, chair of the Languages and Literatures Department was also invited after he expressed in interest in sitting in on our deliberations,. After reviewing the rubric, we spent some time discussing the report for last session, in particular whether the differences in the scoring averages of the new readers in comparison to the long time readers might reflect lower expectations, especially in light of recent NESSE data which indicates that students at UW-Whitewater do not feel as academically challenged as students at peer institutions.

We hypothesized that the increases shown both in average scores in 101 and 390, as well as the more pronounced difference between the 101 and 390 scores—which were evidenced even in the longtime raters’ scores—probably in part provides an index for the extent to which skills might be discovered and validated just by the careful, self-conscious delivery of the assessment instrument. Reflecting over the student work, Steve Vincent made a point that seems to arise in every scoring session: students generally show little evidence of “concessive thinking”—that is, they show little inclination to qualify their conclusions or to recognize that they are based on assumptions, which, if challenged or modified, could lead to other valid conclusions.

On the other hand, this sample of students appeared to be more adept at convincing us that they were invested in their ideas (an element of “voice”) and that they could situate

their ideas in a context which connected them to other voices identified with our intellectual heritage (an element of “literacy”). We hypothesized that the general success that students had on these two points probably had much to do with the nature of the assessment prompt, the drafting process, and preparation for the final papers. It seems likely that instruction which is informed by this assessment rubric and which is delivered in an incremental, self-conscious manner that we have described, for instance, at the National Assessment Conference, will, at least under the circumstances we have witnessed, position students so that they can reveal greater control over the skills that we have targeted as desirable outcomes.

In discussing the dissemination and impact of our assessment process, I was gratified to learn that the History Department has incorporated our rubric and procedures into a writing assessment that occurs at each level in their program. Steve Vincent is enthusiastic about the possibilities for this new assessment in helping the history department to facilitate writing skills, and to help them get a more refined sense of learning outcomes at every level of the History program. George Savage proposed that our assessment may be profitably expanded by including samples from English 102 as well as 101 (especially to test the feeling that some have that students develop a certain writing facility by the end of the 101-102 sequence, only to backslide through sophomore and junior year experiences which do not require much writing in many majors). He also suggested that the various constituencies involved in writing assessment (those involved in writing across the curriculum and those involved in the writing assessment of 390) should work together to inform one another’s findings about the state of writing at UW-Whitewater.

An obvious limitation to the GenEd writing assessment is that conclusions are based on a sampling of a single instructor. If the political and institutional will could be found to develop a culture where all 101 and 390 sections contained a writing sequence informed by an institutional assessment mechanism championed by the instructor, there would be every expectation that student proficiencies in those areas we deem critical to our institution would show solid improvement.

- **Next Steps**

The increase in improvement from 101 to WOI might be attributed, in part, to greater efforts made to integrate the assessment into the activities that comprise both courses which may have better prepared student to write stronger final papers compared to the past. Scoring more 101 and WOI papers in 2005 has helped us determine that the improvement is sustained. There have been no systematic efforts on campus to improve student writing since the assessment began in 1999. Due, in part, to the information provided by the assessment, an *ad hoc* writing-across-the-curriculum committee has been meeting for about a year now. Further, writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-across-the-major have been featured topics at LEARN Center workshops, and faculty from outside the campus have been invited to present on these two topics—most notably Terry Beck from UW-La Crosse where there has been a special focus on improving student writing. These efforts, combined with better integrating assessment into the curriculum, appear to be positive steps that will ultimately contribute to improving student writing at UW-Whitewater.