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ASSESSING WRITING AT WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Carmen Werder, Donna Qualley, and Gary R. McKinney

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there … You listen for awhile, until you decide you have caught the tenor of the argument: then you put in your oar …

—*Kenneth Burke*

ENTERING THE DIALOGUE: A REASON TO TALK

We are engaged in a national conversation that has been going on for some time. It is a conversation focused on making universities accountable for what they do. This national dialogue has compelled four-year schools to rethink their missions, especially in terms of a commitment to teaching. Out of the talk has emerged a strong sense that the burden of proof lies with universities: we need to articulate what we do to the local community and wider public, and we need to supply evidence of that performance. Assumed is the tenet that in an open society, the people providing the funds can expect its public institutions to be held accountable for how those funds are spent. But if what we do is teach students to think, assessing the success of that enterprise becomes a tricky proposition. What measures do we use in determining how well we are leading that complex and intricate intellectual journey?

Situated in this larger national discussion of accountability, the state of Washington is actively pursuing its own answers. The K-12 system has been developing a series of essential learning outcomes and performance-based models of assessment, designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of their instruction. In the state's higher education system, response centers around certain mandated accountability measures, such as retention rates and the graduate efficiency index, which aim to hold institutions to a certain level of performance. Yet while these measures may relate to an institution's level of efficiency, they say very little, if anything, about what our instruction has accomplished in the way of true education.

At the same time as these accountability terms have been imposed on the state's four-year schools, we also have opportunities to create our own instruments. Last spring, the public, four-year institutions' assessment coordinators and a few accountability members met in an effort to find better accountability measures. One idea that surfaced in that meeting was a proposal to evaluate the best writing of college seniors. This plan was based on the assumption that writing offers a significant, if not the best, window into student reasoning ability. Because of this melding of abilities, assessing student writing could get us closer to assessing learning. And yet what could be more daunting than finding such a measure? After considerable discussion by some of the state's college composition teachers, the decision was made to pilot the proposal. Below is a report on this study representing the writing instructors' perspective, followed by a closer look at Western's plans for writing asessment.

REVIEWING A WRITING ASSESSMENT PILOT

In late spring, several writing faculty and administrators representing all but one of the state four-year public schools gathered to discuss a proposal by assessment coordinators to assess senior-level writing. Most of us went to the meeting con-

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cerned—if not downright grouchy. Three concerns were immediately evident. How could we assess papers across disciplines without common assignment parameters? How could we apply one set of criteria to judge all papers regardless of discipline? And how could one writing sample possibly be used as an accountability measure linked to university funding?

In spite of these serious concerns, we surprised ourselves by agreeing to participate in a pilot. We had not been converted; in fact, some of us thought it judicious to participate in the pilot simply to confirm our suspicions that it wouldn't work. Neither did we want writing faculty to look like close-minded pedagogues. After all, we did (and still do) believe that writing can be assessed and that colleges are accountable for their instruction. Finally, it was at minimum an important political move at least to try the idea, so we agreed to give it a go and hastily worked to gather papers and to identify discipline people from our campuses to participate in scoring sessions.

RUBRIC

At the first session in July, each of the five disciplinary groups (biology, business, engineering, English, and sociology) drafted a rubric, or set of criteria, that seemed to mark successful papers. From these small group drafts, we worked together as a whole group to generate a master rubric, then worked again in small groups. What emerged were six broad categories:

- **Content** (what ideas were included);
- **Organization** (how they were ordered and connected);
- **Reasoning** (how they were developed);
- **Rhetoric** (whether they were expressed appropriately for the situation);
- **Disciplinarity** (whether they were expressed appropriately for the discipline); and
- **Conventions** (whether they were presented conventionally in terms of standard written English).

Under each category, we listed various sub-criteria that might be considered in assessing each category. In our discussions, we also noted the value of connecting the language of our rubric to that used in K-12 where possible, and while our six categories reflect the shift to discipline-based writing at the college level, there is some shared language with the six-trait scheme used at the lower levels. After leaving the July sessions, we revised the rubric over e-mail, and then used it for the August rating sessions when business and community members joined the groups. While further revisions have been suggested regarding the rubric, participants seemed generally satisfied with the categories and the comprehensiveness of the sub-criteria.

READING

The August sessions began and ended with surveys polling the attitudes of participants towards assessing writing. After completing the pre-session surveys, we began the reading process by doing an exercise in "Deep Reading," a method devised by Margaret Himley and recommended by Lynn Briggs (EWU). The approach involves reading aloud, paraphrasing, and describing a piece of writing before judging its worth. While there was some initial question about the need for such an approach, the process turned out to be extremely useful in the way it set a context of careful reading for the remaining three days. After trying out this deliberate, deep reading process in the whole group, we formed disciplined-based groups in business, engineering, biology, sociology, and English. During the first round, each group included a writing specialist, a disciplinary faculty, and sometimes an assessment coordinator. For the second cycle of reading, these groups also included business and community members.

Carmen worked primarily with the business group, and was struck by the absolutely central role of the disciplinary faculty. Several times, she rated a paper higher than the business teachers. Often they would point out inaccuracies in the information and gaps in the reasoning that only people from the discipline could do. At the same time, as a writing teacher, she was able to suggest language for talking about common ideas as well as recommend ways for rethinking and reframing the criteria. And the assessment people were very helpful in urging the group to keep their focus on textual features—to make empirically-based judgments. All three perspectives proved valuable in reaching assessment decisions on the sample papers.

RESPONSE

Overall, the pilot affirmed the value of getting teachers together in the same room around a set of papers, clarified our understanding of the complexity of writing assessment, and confirmed our fear that the absence of common specifications for the papers would be problematic. Indeed, a recurring theme was that judgments on individual papers kept veering back to the assignment—which, unfortunately, was often missing or vague. It was especially difficult to deter-

mine the effectiveness of the writing without an assignment, and when the assignment was vague or mostly form-driven, the writing tended to present a superficial/unreasoned discussion of a topic. The consensus was that the more well-founded the assignment, the stronger the writing.

The group's reluctance to reduce writing to one overall score was reflected in the intricacies of the rubric as well as in the post surveys, where the strongest area of agreement was a firm belief in the complexity of writing assessment—a sentiment deepened by our experience. Moreover, participants indicated even greater concern with assessment decisions based on just one writing sample

Clearly, the most impressive value of the pilot was faculty development. Faculty were willing to modify their thinking when they had the opportunity to work with actual student papers and to discuss them with colleagues. Pre- and post-session survey results indicated that a third of the participants changed their attitudes from the first day to the last. By articulating our beliefs in the face of challenging questions, we all came to a fuller understanding of what constitutes effective writing at the senior level in various disciplines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given continuing concerns as well as an appreciation for the benefits of such a cross-disciplinary enterprise, several recommendations emerged, primarily to conduct another pilot—with the following changes:

- Revisit the rubric to see how it might be refined and perhaps streamlined.
- Establish some common submission specifications (e.g. page range and kinds of tasks)
- Ask for assignments to be submitted with all writing samples.
- Ask for a writer's reflective commentary attached to each paper stating writer's consent to use the paper, along with understanding of assignment expectations, and intentions for the piece.
- Open a campus-wide dialogue on each of our campuses exploring ways to duplicate the kind of deep reading-assessment process experienced in the pilot.

Another idea that has surfaced is the suggestion to invite all senior capstone faculty whose students would be participating in another pilot to attend a campus

workshop on designing writing assignments and creating evaluation criteria. That way, the writing samples would spring from writing assignments that were more likely to prompt the best student writing possible.

As writing teachers, we can't help but wonder now. How do we sustain the perception of writing assessment as a complex activity and still move forward to use it as a measure of undergraduate learning? And, most importantly, we ask: **How can we translate our assessment observations into real changes in writing instruction on our own campus?**

BRINGING IT BACK HOME:
A Comprehensive and Ongoing Program of Writing Assessment, Research, Faculty Development, and Classroom Instruction

Recent events on our own campus echo the national and state focus on assessment as both top-down and bottom-up initiatives have emerged. After the 1998 Accreditation Report was delivered, Western received a call from President Morse for the further development and articulation of a university program of assessment, and each department has been asked to develop learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Emerging as a cornerstone of this institutional assessment plan is our campus writing assessment effort.

Many of us in the campus community have come to realize the integral relationships among assessment, research, instruction, and faculty development. We can't forge ahead in one area without continual attention to our efforts in the other areas. A number of plans, pilots, and initiatives currently underway aim to establish a comprehensive and ongoing program of writing assessment, research, and faculty development—with the overall goal being to improve instruction across subjects at all levels. Of course, underlying all these efforts are some fundamental understandings about the nature of writing itself:

• **Writing is a situated activity**: When we compose, we write for a particular audience and for a particular purpose. By its very nature, writing effectiveness depends on context. Therefore, writing assessment and instruction must be discipline-based. While broad categories of performance may be agreed on, specific elements play out differently across disciplines. Successful writing in English is distinct from successful writing in biology. Thus, any valid measure of writing effectiveness must account for those disciplinary distinctions.

• **Writing is an acquired ability:** Unlike some skills that can be mastered once and for all, writing ability involves a complex set of skills gained over time. While a student may master the language of a word processing program in a fairly limited and set amount of time, the challenges of composing with the English language demand a much longer time (some would say a lifetime). Therefore, writing instruction must be ongoing and diffused throughout the curriculum.

• **Writing integrates reasoning with communicating:** When we write, we must both think and present that thinking in a way that readers will understand. These skills are inextricable. When we talk about college-level writing, we're not talking about "how to say nothing correctly in 500 words," we mean saying something meaningful and saying it clearly enough for others to make sense of it. Teaching writing necessarily means teaching ways of thinking. Therefore, the responsibility to teach and to assess writing is a shared responsibility and not one that should be confined to the English Department (though the English Department has a significant role to play).

FILLING A GAP:
A SECOND REQUIRED WRITING COURSE

The above assumptions about the nature of writing underlie recent discussions in our writing requirements at both the lower and upper levels. The approval of a second writing course as part of the GUR reflects an effort to make both writing instruction and assessment part of our students' education throughout their careers at Western, not just in one class during their first year. The first-year course is designed to introduce students to some key rhetorical concepts and critical and reflective habits of mind that will help them learn the specific requirements of other communities. The second-level writing course builds on the first by providing more situated writing instruction and by offering the opportunity for students to practice using their newly acquired ways of thinking and communicating. These new sophomore level writing courses are scheduled to go into effect in the 1999-2000 academic year.

This year, the English Department, in conjunction with Writing Center faculty, are piloting fourteen sections of two possible variations of courses that might satisfy the new writing requirement. Seven sections are stand-alone English 201 composition courses that are linked to other GUR subjects (geology, psychology, anthropology, and East Asian studies) and a one credit library

research methods course. Seven sections are English 297 "Writing in the Context" courses, where instructors will balance course content with writing instruction. If deemed successful, the English 297 course could be used as a model for developing "Writing in the Context" courses in a variety of disciplines. Carmen Werder and Steven Vanderstaay are coordinating these pilot courses, including efforts to:

• assess student satisfaction and course effectiveness;
• identify faculty responses to teaching these courses; and
• propose student learning outcome models.

INTRODUCING MID-LEVEL CHECKPOINTS:
NEW ASSESSMENT INITIATIVES

Recent revisions to our writing proficiency requirement, resulting in elimination of the Junior Writing Exam, have led to a proposal for integrating assessment into courses that carry "writing units." An idea, first suggested by Diana Weymark (Economics) and then given voice by Thor Hansen (Geology), the writing unit plan would recognize specific courses that currently (or might with some revision) contain writing components. Depending on the nature and extent of the writing instruction, these courses would be given a designation of 1-3 writing units. By requiring students to have so many writing units to graduate, the plan would allow us to better integrate writing assessment with instruction—where it belongs—and would provide an incentive to include more writing instruction in existing courses. Further examination and discussion of the writing unit plan will continue this year.

The writing units plan at the upper level, together with the second GUR writing course at the lower level, has the potential to provide multiple assessment opportunities. More instructors and more courses will be involved in writing instruction; thus, more chances for diagnosis, referral, and further instruction will arise. By expecting students to have writing experiences at every level, more opportunities to assess their progress will be ensured.

INTEGRATING A PROGRAM OF ONGOING RESEARCH:
A LINK BETWEEN ASSESSMENT AND INSTRUCTION

So that we may identify the patterns in the development and deepening of students' learning during their time at Western, we are beginning to gather descriptive information on students' writing. This year, a writing prompt is being administered at the beginning and end

of selected 100, 200 and 300 level writing courses. In addition to providing an ongoing demonstration of students' writing at different points in their education, the prompt will also offer an indication of their self-assessment abilities and their developing awareness of effective writing. This information will allow us to hypothesize about the effects of instruction on students' understanding in the short term (at the beginning and end of a course) and in the long term (over a period of several years and many courses). Once some patterns begin to emerge in this data, teachers will be better able to evaluate which students may not be prepared to handle the writing demands of their particular courses. In this way the prompt (see below) will also serve as a diagnostic assessment tool that will allow faculty to gauge the progress and needs of students at numerous points in their education. It is envisaged that this information will better enable us to advise students and channel them into appropriate courses.

Writing Prompt

"In a few pages, talk about a paper you wrote for a class during the past year. Explain what you were supposed to do, how you went about doing it, and how effective your efforts were. Then, on the basis of this writing experience (the process you went through and your teacher or peers' comments/advice), discuss what you think are the characteristics of good writing. Finally, explain why you think most teachers would agree/disagree with you." (At the end of the course, the prompt will be adjusted to read "talk about a paper you wrote for this class.")

It is hoped that in the future, the use of this prompt may be extended to upper level writing units and senior capstone courses. In these courses, the prompt would be recast from "characteristics of good writing" to "characteristics of good writing in (name of the discipline)."

DEVELOPING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING PROGRAM: A WAY TO ENSURE COORDINATION

Given the new directions and needs in writing assessment, research, and instruction across the curriculum, a proposal has emerged for an interdisciplinary program that would serve as a consortium, an alliance for cross-disciplinary writing instruction and assessment at Western, as well as a coordinating body for campus-wide writing initiatives, such as the ones just discussed.

Last June, the Provost's Writing Committee recommended the establishment of such a program, which would be responsible for university-wide efforts to:

- coordinate and support faculty development and writing instruction in the disciplines;
- develop comprehensive assessment models for writing; and
- contribute to an ongoing program of research on student writing at Western.

The Interdisciplinary Writing Program (IWP) is envisaged as one way to increase the possibility that writing will be integrated into instruction at Western. As envisaged, the IWP would consist of permanent tenure and non-tenure track composition faculty as well as disciplinary (writing and non-writing) faculty from departments on an annual and part-time basis. All faculty—composition and disciplinary, tenure and non-tenure, permanent and part-time—would have the opportunity to participate in ongoing professional development and to be part of a dynamic teaching community while they teach writing in their disciplines. Currently, the Provost is forming an interim group to study the proposal further; meanwhile, discussion for developing such a coordinating body is underway.

HANDING THE OAR TO YOU: CONTINUING THE DIALOGUE

Given these ongoing conversations at the national, state, and local levels, we could gain as a university community by talking with each other about what we do.

What ideas do you have for ways we can work in a joint venture to use writing assessment to forge the connections between how we teach and what students learn?

You can join an on-line discussion about writing at Western via the Dialogue conference site at http://www.ac.wwu.edu/~dialogue. Or please feel free to jot down your thoughts and mail them to us at MS: 9010, attn: Gary McKinney. (From off campus, see address on back page.)

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