

Final Report of the Pilot Assessment, 23 August 2006

**Learning Outcomes of the UCI Lower-Division GE Writing Requirement:
the Capstone Research Paper in WR 39C and Humanities 1C**

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Background

This assessment project has been inspired by recommendations in the recent *Boyer Report* on undergraduate education in research universities and guided by curricular principles promulgated by the National Council of Teachers of English and the national Council of Writing Program Administrators. It reflects our common curricular goal at UCI of "developing undergraduate research skills in the context of a research university whose primary purpose is the production of knowledge and its reproduction in an intellectual community that extends beyond the boundaries of the campus."¹ These principles are expressed in course objectives for our two writing courses, either of which, with prerequisites, satisfies the lower-division, general education, writing requirement at UCI:

- the stand alone first-year Composition course, Writing 39C ("Argument and Research")
<http://eee.uci.edu/programs/comp/39c-student/>
- the integrated Humanities Core Course, Humanities 1C
<http://eee.uci.edu/programs/humcore/Student/AboutCore.htm>

Over the last few years Elizabeth Losh (Humanities Core Writing Director), Ellen Strenski (Composition Director), and Lynda Haas (WR 39C Course Director) have developed their respective curricula in these two courses to feature a capstone research paper defined by common assignment objectives and learning outcomes.

Purpose

The overall goal of this assessment project was to determine the extent to which the assignment prompts, grading rubrics, and student achievement in these two courses (Humanities 1C and WR 39C) align both with each other and with these common, expressed curricular principles. The pilot project reported here was intended to provide the basis for refining the design of our assessment methods and materials to be used in future, larger-scale, assessment so that we can confidently gauge the success of our own instructional practices, and in turn refine these practices if necessary. An automatic by-product is a means to assess any alternative course or assignment objectives, or student performance, that are claimed to be comparable to writing instruction in WR 39C and Humanities 1C—off-campus in IGETSE approvals or transfer student petitions for equivalency credit, or on-campus in new GE initiatives like the Freshman Integrated Program.

Design, Methods, and Materials

Sixteen primary traits were extracted from our assignment prompts and grading rubrics. These traits were organized into four categories (Analysis, Evidence, Conventions, Structure), resulting in a matrix (attached below) for use in analyzing accomplishment in 40 randomly selected student capstone research papers (20 from WR 39C, 20 from Humanities 1C). Eight readers, all experienced instructors who have participated in scoring the University of California Analytical Writing Placement Exam, were

¹ Michael P. Clark and Elizabeth Losh, "Intellectual Community and Integrated Curricula in the First-Year Experience: the Humanities Core Course at the University of California, Irvine." *Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction: First-Year English, Humanities Core Courses, Seminars*, forthcoming from the Modern Language Association, 2007.

trained to use the matrix by first discussing the assignment and objectives of both courses, and then practicing with several norming samples. These readers then examined each paper by matching it up with these 16 traits, asking "Which of these characteristics are exhibited?" and recording the answers on scoring sheets. To optimize accuracy, each paper was read by at least three readers.

This instrument is **not** a grading rubric. A rubric would guide judgment of a range of accomplishment with each trait. Instead, this matrix was binary: "Did the paper exhibit a particular trait, or not?" The reading of each paper thereby resulted in a distinctive pattern that described specifically accomplished or missing learning outcomes from among a possible 16. By tallying the results, we were able to arrive at numerical scores, both overall (the total number of traits exhibited) and within each of the four categories. The reading took place from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on August 23, 2006, taking slightly longer than we had originally anticipated and budgeted.

Readers

In addition to the directors already named, participants included the WR 39B Course Director (Carla Copenhagen), a lecturer from the Composition Program (Peg Hesketh), a TA from the English Department who teaches WR 39C (Tracey Creech), a lecturer from Humanities Core Course (Eva Wessell), and a TA from the English Department who teaches Humanities Core Course (Brook Haley).

Results

1. The success of our efforts to align the curricula in WR 39C and Humanities 1C was confirmed in that, even with quite different assignment prompts, readers could not automatically distinguish several of the papers, that is, whether the student was in WR 39C or Humanities 1C.

2. The matrix that we created was definitely proven useful, but we did identify two ways in which this instrument will need to be refined for use in similar assessment projects in the future:

1. The language should be clarified to make it even more operational. For example, one trait ("Introduction effectively gains reader attention and announces purpose ") is really two traits.
2. The traits within each category should be reordered to reflect frequency and difficulty.

Our experience with this pilot has given us a clear sense of what needs to be done to refine this matrix instrument for future use. Working now to refine it, however, was beyond the pilot's scope.

3. Analysis (attached below) of students' relative success or difficulty with each of the 16 traits has provided immediate curricular guidance for us. Both courses stress the importance of contextualizing information by providing some evaluation of its source (trait: Source Evaluation). Specific individual exercises and writing assignments in each course teach this ability; our grading rubrics test it. For example, we aim to teach students not only how to extract relevant information from an appropriate source, but also how to use it in context.

Consider the student investigating the issue of possible liberal media bias who wishes to cite former FCC Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson's testimony to the Senate Appropriations Committee in which Tomlinson criticizes Bill Moyers, a source easily returned by a rudimentary Google search. This student should go beyond simply quoting or paraphrasing Tomlinson and citing him as evidence. The student should also present this evidence-- that is, Tomlinson's criticism--in the context of Tomlinson's former duties as a propagandist at Voice of America, his appointment to the FCC as a loyal

conservative by President Bush, and his subsequent resignation under fire. And Bill Moyers' response, aired on Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now!" deserves the same kind of skeptical scrutiny. Is this kind of analysis difficult? Yes. Is teaching it difficult? Yes. Not surprisingly, this trait was the least successful. However, to expect less of our students is to do them and us a disservice, for where else will they learn and practice this kind of vitally important close textual analysis? We will accordingly place even more emphasis in WR 39C and Humanities 1C on this and the other two objectives that were least often satisfied:

- #7: Source Evaluation by 15% of student writers
- #2: Critical Thinking by 33% of student writers
- #3: Expert Knowledge by 53% of student writers

4. Students' success at accomplishing learning objectives was also demonstrated, suggesting the success of instruction in the two courses. The objectives most often satisfied were

- #5: Source Variety by 98% of student writers
- #8: Source Relevance by 85% of student writers
- #4: Logical Conclusion by 83% of student writers

5. The number of references in students' "Works Cited" sections was conspicuously large (as well as varied), and caught our attention, although this measure (total number of sources cited) was not one of the 16 traits.

- Individual research sources cited in the 20 **Humanities 1C** samples ranged from 9 to 21, with an **average of 13.95**.
- Individual research sources cited in the 20 **WR 39C** papers ranged from 8 to 22, with an **average of 13.4**.

Both courses explicitly stress the importance of quality of evidence over quantity,² as indicated in the four traits listed under the category, "Evidence (Research)." Note that these average numbers (13.95 and 13.4) are the total of separate, individual, research sources that have been cited in the paper—not merely the number of citations in the paper, and not just a bibliography. They also represent an impressive range: from scholarly databases in the library to primary sources to government archives to the public Internet and conventional print. So this means that our undergraduates are learning—some more successfully than others—how to find, evaluate, and integrate evidence from a variety of substantial research sources in order to build a sustained written argument.

Conclusion

There is great interest nationally these days in the delivery of composition instruction—whether in integrated core or stand-alone courses—and mechanisms for demonstrating accountability in such general education courses³. We believe that our pilot, by developing and testing an instrument and procedures for such an assessment mechanism, has contributed significantly to UCI's mission to educate freshmen, and we look forward to building on this preliminary work.

² Ellen Strenski, "Online Reading between the Lines: Searching for and Evaluating Internet Information," *Assembly on Computers in English Journal*, 1.3 (1998): 56-69. Reprinted in *The Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for College Writing Teachers*, 2000: 223-234.

³ Gillmore, Gerald M., *The Evaluation of General Education: Lessons from the USA State of Washington Experience*, University of Washington, Office of Educational Assessment, 2003.

Attachment 1: Four Indicators of Effective Writing: Matrix used in the August 23rd reading

WR 39C/HumCore Final Essay Assessment

Analysis	Evidence (Research)	Conventions	Structure
Purpose/thesis is evident, significant, complex	Several texts used as evidence from a variety of sources	Evidence of crafting, revision, editing, proofreading, and attention to appropriate format (MLA)	Overall organization captures the designated purpose
Depth of critical thinking about topic (and where appropriate, opposing voices)	Sources are credible for an academic audience (specific discipline)	Documentation style evident and appropriate; sources are accurately integrated into student text	Introduction effectively gains reader attention and announces purpose
Writing illustrates expert knowledge and understanding of topic	Sources critically evaluated, integrated into student's argument	Academic ethos established through varied and complex sentence structure as well as diction.	The ordering of the paragraphs leads the reader through the text logically; each paragraph has unitary purpose
Interpretation and analysis lead to logical conclusions	Sources used are relevant, necessary, persuasively integrated	Use of specialized vocabulary and specialized concepts that demonstrate understanding of discipline	Writer uses signposts, (phrases, sentences, transitional expressions), headings, and bullets to create logical flow of ideas throughout essay

Attachment 2: Frequency Analysis

Objective #	Objective Name	X out of 40	%
1	Purpose/thesis	28	70%
2	Critical thinking	13	33%
3	Expert Knowledge	21	53%
4	Logical Conclusions	33	83%
5	Source Variety	39	98%
6	Source Credibility	29	73%
7	Source Evaluation	6	15%
8	Source Relevance	34	85%
9	Sentence Level	31	78%
10	Documentation	28	70%
11	Academic Ethos	25	63%
12	Revision, crafting	27	68%
13	Overall organization	28	70%
14	Introduction	26	65%
15	Paragraph Integrity	26	65%
16	Transitions	27	68%

Objectives least often satisfied:

- 7: Source Evaluation 15%
- 2: Critical Thinking 33%
- 3: Expert Knowledge 53%

Objectives most often satisfied:

- 5: Source Variety 98%
- 8: Source Relevance 85%
- 4: Logical Conclusion 83%