

English 101 and English 102 Annual Assessment Report (AY 2006-2007)

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Introduction

During the past academic year, the English department has been undertaking an extensive review and redefinition of the freshman composition program. In the spring of 2006, the department's Committee on Instruction approved a revised syllabus for English 101 and new course requirements. During the spring semester, members of the program instructional staff have been discussing changes in English 102 in the light of the revised protocols for English 101.

These changes were undertaken, partly in response to data on student performance and instructors' evaluation criteria in English 101 in prior assessment activities and, partly in response to observations about the freshman writing program in the preliminary report of the General Education Task Force.

The principal changes in English 101 were the adoption of a common syllabus template for all sections of the course along with a limited choice of texts. The template prescribes a common sequence of assignments that focuses on critical reading of academic prose and writing in response to assigned readings. In addition, the new requirements converted the capstone essay, previously used as an assessment instrument, to a course requirement. Students must obtain an acceptable score on the capstone exam from two readers in order to pass the course.

During the spring semester, a staff working group has been defining a set of activities and steps toward the production of a required research paper as the basis for proposing a revised syllabus for English 102.

Program Goals

There has been no formal revision of the goals for English 101 and 102; however, the new course design for English 101 and the efforts to bring English 102 into a congruent relationship with English 101, entail implicit changes to the earlier goals. In effect, efforts to improve the first year writing program have proceeded, not from a set of theoretical statements of goals, but from experiments with specific student activities and assignments that seem to be related to the kinds of tasks and language skills students will be expected to demonstrate through the rest of their college careers. These experiments should provide the basis for a revised statement of goals for the first-year composition offerings.

Outcomes

Most of the program design and assessment efforts during the 2006-2007 academic year have been devoted to establishing specific learning outcomes and evaluation criteria for the components of the revised English 101 course design. With the financial support of the CLASS dean's office, we were able to form Staff Working Groups of instructors who met for half-day workshops and participated in on-line discussions. The English 101 working group in the fall reviewed specific sample assignments for each of the prescribed assignment types on the syllabus and formulated learning objectives and evaluation criteria for each of these assignments. The group also attempted to relate the evaluation criteria for the capstone final to the learning outcomes associated with the sequence of prescribed assignments. It developed evaluation rubrics for the capstone exam and tested them in sessions that involved readings of actual student essays. It also developed congruent "check lists" for students taking the exam to inform them of the expectations that would be the basis for the capstone evaluation.

The English 102 assessment strategy of establishing a group to read and evaluate a sample of final research papers from English 102 courses was continued with the fall 2006 sections of the course. Since the goals and outcomes of English 102 were under consideration at the time, and since readers were aware of the new emphases on critical reading and appropriate use of secondary materials in English 101, it is probably not appropriate to draw any conclusions for a comparison of last-year's data with this year's. The principal areas of weakness identified by the readers involved the students' ability to engage secondary sources in an acceptably sophisticated manner.

Methods

In an effort to find appropriate bases for specifying goals and outcomes for the first year writing program and for assessing the effects and effectiveness of the revised English 101 design, the department has collected and analyzed data related to student success rates in English 101 and on the capstone final, and instructors' decisions in relation to the capstone exam. Since the capstone exercise has become an exit requirement for the course and, in connection with that new role, the scoring scale has been changed from a four-point to a three-point scale, comparisons with prior years results are not possible. However the data related to the capstone during the current academic year serves to foreground a number of questions and issues.

Findings

Data from the fall and spring offerings of the revised English 101 course serve to highlight a number of questions that will need to be addressed in the coming year.

1) The attrition rate in English 101 (the percentage of students who enroll in the course and either withdraw or fail to achieve a passing grade) is quite high: 38.1% in fall; 40.8% in spring. This raises the question of whether the standards and expectations in the course are appropriate to our incoming students. The apparent discrepancy between expectations

and student performance is reinforced by scoring patterns on the capstone final. Readers assigned a score of 1, 2, or 3 to each essay. A score of 2 was the minimum required to pass the course. Readers were provided with a set of criteria for evaluating the essays (see attachment A). They were to assign a score of “1” to an essay that is “seriously deficient judged by these criteria,” and a score of “3” to an essay “that displays superior mastery in all or most of these areas.” In spring, 315 students wrote the capstone exam. Since each essay was read twice, there were 630 individual reader evaluations. The score of “3” was assigned only 23 times (3.7% of the total number of evaluations).

This discrepancy between course expectations and student performance may suggest a need to consider whether the course design and expected level of performance are appropriate for many of our students. Alternatively, the discrepancy may suggest a need to reconsider the current placement system for freshman composition and the current design of developmental support. Since all developmental courses in English will become the responsibility of the English department in 2007-2008, there is an opportunity and a need to redesign the content and structure of these services so that they better meet the deficiencies that prevent students from succeeding in English 101. During summer 2007, the Department will be offering an intensive, experimental developmental program, which will include extensive diagnostic testing of students. This should provide a basis for more accurately identifying the specific developmental needs of incoming students who are placed in developmental courses.

2) A second issue that received considerable discussion among the staff is the appropriateness of the capstone exam as a measure of students’ achievement of the program goals. The new rule establishing the capstone as an exit requirement allowed for instructors to appeal on behalf of students who failed to meet the capstone requirement, but who, on the basis of their performance in the course, should, in the instructor’s judgment, pass the course. In fall, 40 of the 95 students who were unsuccessful on the capstone (42.1%) passed the course on appeal. In spring, 27 of the 87 who were unsuccessful on the capstone (31.0%) passed the course on appeal. In order to get some indication of the validity of these appeals, we looked at students in the appeal groups who were enrolled in 11 or more credits during the semester and compared their GPAs in other courses to those of students who failed the capstone and the English 101 course. In fall the GPA for the group of students who passed on appeal was 2.91. Students who passed the capstone and the course had a group GPA of 2.96 in their other courses. Students who failed English 101 had a GPA of 2.05 in their other courses. In spring the GPA for students who passed on appeal was 2.55; of students who passed without an appeal was 2.65; and of students who failed was 1.55. Finally, we looked at the performance of the fall appeal group in English 102 in the spring. Of the students who passed the course on appeal in the fall, 26 enrolled in English 102 in spring: 20 were successful and 6 failed to achieve a passing grade. The group’s GPA in English 102 was 2.60. The group GPA of all fall English 101 students who enrolled in English 102 in the spring was 2.96.

Although most English 101 instructors reported that they generally found the that the capstone results corresponded to their expectations, there clearly seem to be a significant

number of students who fail the capstone, but are capable of going on to English 102, and their instructors' judgment seems to be generally correct in these cases. We will need to look more closely at these students capstone essays to determine if there are evaluation issues that need to be corrected or if there are ways of redesigning the exit test to avoid these apparently inaccurate negative results.

Review

As noted earlier, two staff working groups, one for each of the freshman composition courses, were directly involved in formulating learning outcomes and evaluation criteria for English 101 and in designing a revised curriculum for English 102. Data from the fall English 101 sections were reviewed by the entire instructional staff at a half-day workshop between the fall and spring semesters. The staff also discussed clarifying the relationship between English 101 and English 102 at this workshop.

Actions

Please see the "Introduction" and the section on "Findings."

The department has just appointed a new director of First-Year Writing, Dr. Randall McClure. He will be identifying a course of action in response to the information compiled from the 2006-2007 assessment.

ATTACHMENT A

English 101 Capstone Final Exam Scoring Rubric--Fall 2006

[The following are the criteria for determining whether a student's essay qualifies for a score of "2" and thus meets the capstone requirement for passing the course.]

The essay should give convincing evidence of

- A clear and correct understanding of the author's thesis or purpose
- Recognition of the author's argumentative strategy, with some references to how the author presents and supports her argument
- Formulation of a clear position *in response to* the author's thesis and/or main points
- Ability to develop this position using at least one or two examples or supporting points
- Ability to use paraphrase and quotation appropriately and to break with the author's original language
- Ability to use signal phrases that distinguish the writer's own viewpoint from that of the author's--at least occasional use of this technique and at least some success in making it work
- Competent, intelligible sentence structures and syntax
- Recognition of an appropriate level of formality for academic writing and at least partial success in achieving an appropriate level
- At least partially successful use of transitions or other rhetorical devices to create cohesion and coherence

An essay that is seriously deficient judged by these criteria should receive a score of "1."

An essay that displays superior mastery in all or most of these areas receives a score of "3."