

EMBEDDING BASIC COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT IN A COLLEGE WRITING COURSE

Since this conference was planned, it seems to me that its business has become more urgent, because of the Summer 2003 SUNY Board of Trustees resolution on system-wide value-added assessment. I'm certainly not opposed to value-added assessment in principle; indeed, I think that's precisely what we're all engaged in on each of our campuses. In practice, however, I have serious reservations about the system-wide "common measures" mandated by the Trustees' resolution. My major problem is that "common measures" is most commonly taken to mean "standardized tests," and that most standardized tests are not rigorous enough. Most standardized tests simply don't measure the higher-order skills of analysis, argumentation, evaluation, and judgment that the Basic Communication outcomes are designed to assess.

At the end of my presentation, I hope you'll agree that the way Purchase College faculty, for example, are assessing the Basic Communication outcomes is at least potentially more rigorous than a lot of the state-wide tests that have been devised and implemented in states around the country over the past twenty-five years. The University of Chicago's George Hillocks, Jr., in his 2002 book *The Testing Trap*, has documented in detail how state-wide tests in New York, Texas, Illinois, and Oregon have actually led to worse student writing, because of their harmful effects on the way writing is taught. Only Kentucky's portfolio-based assessment seems to have contributed to improving student work.¹ Closer to home, another model would seem to be the CUNY Proficiency exam, which I'm told has also had beneficial effects on student writing.²

And that's the reason I'm so committed to the College Writing course I'll be discussing this morning. What I've found so far is that if my College Writing students work hard and do all the assignments, then by the end of the semester, their writing in most cases shows demonstrable improvement. That's why my

¹ George Hillocks, Jr. *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press. 2002.

² <http://portal.cuny.edu/cms/id/cuny/documents/informationpage/002075.htm>

major criterion for any system-wide common measures is that they promote better student work.

If the general education assessment is going to lead to better student work, faculty have to buy in at the classroom level. Faculty buy-in at the classroom level is more likely if assessment makes use of what faculty are already doing. One way of taking advantage of what faculty are already doing is by embedding general education assessment in our existing college courses. This morning, I'm going to describe how Purchase College embedded the SUNY written communication student learning outcomes (SLOs) in our existing College Writing course, a required course for all first-year students. Although College Writing meets a total of ten student learning outcomes, I'm restricting myself to the three written communication SLOs, because I want to be specific enough about how the course works, so that anyone who is interested can use or adapt any features you find helpful for your own assessment efforts. In return, I'd also appreciate any suggestions about how what you're doing at your campus might be helpful to us at Purchase. I also recognize that the embedding approach won't work for everyone, but I'm hoping my account will be useful even for those of you who, unlike the Purchase faculty, had to make major course changes in order to accommodate the SUNY SLOs. Please feel free to interrupt me at any point with questions.

Let me begin by saying that I think we owe a debt to the Provost's Advisory Committee on General Education and to everyone at SUNY, who insisted that the university's general education goals be expressed in terms of student learning outcomes (SLOs). The three Basic Communication outcomes (see handout), which deal with written communication, are that students will:

- (1) produce coherent texts within common college-level written forms;
- (2) demonstrate the ability to revise and improve such texts;
- (3) research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details

Because these outcomes are generic enough to cover the typical freshman composition course, we didn't have to worry about redesigning College Writing from scratch. We didn't have to make major course modifications. We didn't even have to reformulate the student learning outcomes. All we had to do was substitute the

SUNY SLOs for the existing course objectives in our common syllabus. As a matter of fact, we even added an objective of our own: "Students will use course concepts to develop in-depth readings of texts and critically literate written papers."

Using the SUNY SLOs caused us no fuss or ideological *Sturm und Drang* because the SUNY SLOs are, in this case at least, quite straightforward, and can be satisfied by any reasonably comprehensive basic composition course. So at Purchase, the first step, adding the SUNY SLOs to the course syllabus, was easy. Because our existing course objectives and the SUNY student learning outcomes were so well aligned, we could move immediately to the next step, which was to examine our standard syllabus to see which of our existing learning activities corresponded to each of the outcomes. Showing specifically how various learning activities, already built into College Writing, actually measure the written communication SLOs is my major purpose this morning.

The first outcome calls for students to "produce coherent texts within common college-level written forms" (see handout). At Purchase, College Writing has a maximum of 25 students and typically meets twice a week. There are sections for liberal arts students, for conservatory arts students, as well as a number of "mixed" sections. No matter what the section, there is a writing homework assignment for virtually every class meeting.

The course is divided into three units or modules. Its heart is a series of three papers, one for each module, each of which is drafted, peer-reviewed, and redrafted, before a third and final draft is submitted. Each of the three successive papers is written in a different and progressively more demanding genre, beginning with a personal narrative, followed by what I'll call an analytic essay, and ending with a research paper.

Here I need to interject that while all sections of College Writing have a common form or method, there is a wide range of course themes including, just this year:

- poets writing on painters
- immigrant and ethnic narratives
- art, technology and their interdependence
- the history of American cities
- autobiography, memoir, and self-portrait
- the environment and land use

- evolution and revolution in American art
- fashion and technology
- Italian American literature, its production and critical reception

The theme of the College Writing section I've taught for the past two years, somewhat pedestrian by comparison perhaps, is the US high school. Many of us, including me, use a text specifically written for the course, Kathleen McCormick's *Reading Our Histories, Understanding Our Cultures* (2nd edition, Longman 2003; hereinafter ROH), which contains chapters on a surprising number of the topics above, including US high schools.

I mention these particulars because I want to stress that although all sections of College Writing use a common method, which I call the McCormick method, after Kathleen McCormick, Purchase's Director of Writing, the course allows for infinitely variable content and faculty preferences. It can and has successfully been taught at Purchase by visual and performing artists, by natural and social scientists, as well as by humanities and English professors. The reason for mentioning my section in particular is because I'm about to start using it as an example, and I wouldn't want anyone to think that the possibilities for College Writing are restricted by my imagination.

Here's how the first SLO--producing "coherent texts within common college-level written forms"--works out with my course theme of the US high school. In their first paper, the personal narrative, students start with their own high school experience, and in the next draft, incorporate some of the perspectives of others at their high school, whether staff or students or both. In their third drafts, my students are required to add data from their high school's annual report card, published on the web, to which I introduce them in a computer lab session on library research early in the semester. So the first paper moves from the personal narrative to a first try at the kind of social and cultural analysis, which will be foregrounded in the second paper.

Because it is precisely social and cultural analysis, which the second paper stresses, I call it the "analytical essay." Before they write the first draft of the second paper, students are assigned a sequenced set of readings selected either from Kathy McCormick's textbook or from other sources. Coupled with each

reading is the assignment to write a two to three page analytical essay in response to complex questions about the reading. The readings are chosen to model and to encourage (1) cultural analysis across the dominant, residual, and emergent aspects of a single culture, and (2) historical analysis across different historical periods.³

For example, in my section on the US high school, students read excerpts from contemporary high school critics and reformers Ted Sizer and Jonathan Kozol, and from a series of reports by the Committee of Ten in 1893, 1918's *Cardinal Principles of Education*, and James Conant's 1959 *The American High School Today*. These assignments are sequenced, leading to the unit II analytical essay, whose three drafts require students to use not only cultural and historical analysis, but to start actively synthesizing these texts.

While they are working through unit II, students are simultaneously engaged in doing research for unit III. A major difference between papers two and three is that while the material for the second paper is supplied to the students in the form of assigned readings, the students themselves supply the research material and the course readings for the third unit paper, through an innovative group research project, described elsewhere by Dr. McCormick.⁴

In order to fulfill the first SUNY Basic Communication SLO, then, all College Writing students produce "coherent texts within common college-level written forms" including fastwrites or freewrites, the narrative, the short response paper, the book report, the analytical essay, and the research paper, all of which incorporate one or more rhetorical genres such as description, summary, exemplification, comparison and contrast, or division and classification.

These (you may agree) are all "common college-level written forms," but (you may ask) what about the requirement that students produce "coherent" texts? How do we make sure that the texts students produce are coherent? That's a very good question. My answer in a word is the rubric, AKA the criteria sheet. For each paper assignment there is a matching rubric, which starts off simply with perhaps

³ This particular method of social and cultural analysis is indebted to Raymond Williams. See ROH 95.

⁴ McCormick, Kathleen. "Do You Believe in Magic: Collaboration and the Demystification of Research." Unpublished paper.

five criteria for the first paper, and gradually becomes more complex, so that by the final draft of the third paper, there may be as many as ten criteria.⁵ These criteria sheets are given to the students with each assignment, before they write their papers. When I grade, I fill out the criteria sheet and return it with each paper, and students do the same when they peer review (which I'll talk more about shortly). But first, I'd like to show how criteria sheets are useful (1) for students, (2) for teachers, and (3) for course and program improvement.

(1) For students, rubrics make clear what the teacher requires. They are specific about what is expected of an essay. Specifying for each assignment the criteria by which it will be evaluated removes a lot of student guesswork about faculty expectations. Returning a completed criteria sheet with each paper gives students a concrete indication of the paper's strengths and weaknesses, where it went wrong, and what can be done to improve it. When they peer review a colleague's paper, students use the same rubric with which they were graded. By examining the work of their peers and measuring it against common criteria, students become more familiar with the characteristics of a good essay.

(2) Criteria sheets also compel us, as faculty, to be explicit about our standards. Constructing a rubric makes us think about and articulate what we regard as the key elements in student compositions. When we use rubrics, we are grading often very diverse student essays according to a set of common criteria. Rubrics thus help us become more objective and consistent in grading, thereby promoting inter-rater reliability.

At Purchase, rubrics also contribute to faculty development. Purchase's Director of Writing, Kathy McCormick, also runs an ambitious faculty development program, with a series of six to eight meetings over the summer and fall semesters, for the twenty-five or so faculty, largely adjuncts, who teach College Writing at Purchase. At these meetings, a frequent activity and one of the most enjoyable is for all faculty to read and grade a sample student paper from one of our classes, using the rubric for the assignment. Going around the room and explaining our ratings and the reasoning behind them, functions as an informal norming session to help us refine criteria and to increase inter-rater reliability. These sessions also

⁵ The criteria sheets at the end of this paper are Kathy McCormick's, with a few modifications.

make us better writers and critics of actual students' writing, because their focus is not just on reliability, but on how to respond to student writing in ways that help students improve their work.

(3) For assessment purposes, rubrics provide us with a means of identifying both strengths and weaknesses in each of our classes. Our students may be pretty good at using detail and their personal experience, for example, but not so proficient at historical and cultural analysis. Last year, my students were weakest at synthesizing texts. I responded by starting to work on synthesis earlier this year, in the second unit, instead of in the third. And what holds for the individual instructor holds for the writing program as a whole. Criteria sheets enable us to look across the variety of classes and instructors to assess the progress of the hundreds of students taking College Writing in any given semester.

This brings me to the second SUNY SLO for written communication: Students will "demonstrate the ability to revise and improve" their texts. In my experience most faculty are big believers in revision, but most students are not. College Writing at Purchase professes that revision is at least as important as original composition, and practices what it preaches by incorporating revision—real revision, not line editing—into the writing process in several ways.

As I've already mentioned, each of the three major papers goes through a series of three drafts. "Revision" is added as a criterion to the rubrics for the second and third drafts, and students are told that unless they substantially revise their papers, their second and third draft grades will remain the same or even drop. To improve their grades, then, students are forced to revise. In addition, revision is a theme of many class activities throughout the semester. After a draft is handed in, a typical class activity is to review and revise, in class, excerpts from several students' drafts. Then there are the peer reviews I mentioned earlier, which I'll now describe in a little more detail.

Students hand in two copies of their first two drafts of each paper, one to the instructor and one to a student peer reviewer. Both the instructor and the student peer reviewer read and mark up the paper with suggestions and corrections and fill out a criteria sheet. For both the instructor and the student reviewer, the emphasis

is not on covering the paper in red ink, but on making concrete, specific, and constructive suggestions. By practicing on other students' work in their peer reviews, the aim is for students simultaneously to learn how better to evaluate and revise their own work with a more objective and critical eye.

Many students don't "get" peer reviewing at first, but with practice, and the example of instructor comments on their own papers, by the end of the semester most students have gotten the hang of it. I've also found that one of the most effective classroom activities in College Writing is to peer review an actual student paper in class. This works much like the faculty norming session I just mentioned, but I've found it such a useful activity, that I want to describe it more closely.

I have a volunteer email me a draft early, for extra credit, so I can xerox it and distribute it to the class. For the first fifteen minutes, the students individually read and mark up the paper, and complete a criteria sheet. Next I assemble the students into small groups, where they discuss and justify their ratings for each criterion, and come up with a group grade. Most importantly, each group then formulates specific suggestions for the writer's next draft. (The test of a plausible suggestion, by the way, is whether the writer finds it concrete and specific enough to follow.) In the last half hour of class, I tabulate on the board the group grades for each of the criteria, and in cases where there is a wide range of grades, we discuss the reasons for the differences and whether they seem legitimate. Finally, each group reports on its suggestions for revision, and we review and refine them through class discussion with the writer whose paper is under review.

As with peer reviewing, some students are initially reluctant or embarrassed to share their work with the class, once they discover how their work (and their grades) benefit from all the suggestions, it is not unusual to have more volunteers than you can use for subsequent group peer review sessions.

Let me move on to the third Basic Communication SLO, that students will "research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details." We've already seen how College Writing students have been engaged in developing an argument and organizing details, so I'll concentrate on the research process. Here I'll be relying on Kathy McCormick's unpublished description of the group research

project, to which I referred earlier. Early in the course students are formed into four research groups of five or six students each. Given my course theme of excellence and equity in US high schools, my four groups deal with race, class, home background, and ethnicity, and their impact on US secondary education.

Each research group has to find five sources: two which provide an overview or history of the problems race, class, etc., pose for US high schools; one an ethnographic account; and two sources which develop possible solutions for the problems. Once the research materials have been identified and approved by me, group oral presentations are scheduled, in preparation for which students read the set of materials for that particular group. In the group oral presentations, which I grade using a rubric, and the students grade using a much simpler rubric, each member of the team summarizes and analyzes their particular research source, and formulates two questions, which the team uses to lead a class discussion at the end of the presentation. The emphasis in the presentations and in the subsequent discussion is on making connections among the research sources--connections, which then lead to the formation of the thesis and argument for the research paper. Between group presentations, we work on synthesizing the research material from the most recent group with that of earlier groups.

Some College Writing instructors wait until all four groups have made their oral presentations before starting the cycle of draft, peer review, redraft for the research paper. Because I find that students benefit from spreading out the drafting and revision process, I have students write their first drafts after two group presentations, followed by the remaining two group presentations, and the second and third drafts. There is a lot more that can be said about the synthesizing and thesis building activities in this third unit of College Writing--and here I again refer you to Dr. McCormick's paper--but I hope I've given you enough detail to understand how College Writing meets the research SLO.

It remains for me to describe the mechanism by which we record and report the results of all these learning activities. One way to do it is to link each SLO with specific assignments, record the results in separate columns in the grade book, and compile and report these results directly on a SUNY gen ed assessment form. This is basically what we do at Purchase, except that we interpose our own form to

record the results holistically at the same time as we are computing our final grades for the course (see handout). Thus each of the ten Basic Communication, Critical Thinking, and Information Management SLOs is linked with one or more specific assignments, and each instructor completes the machine-readable form for all ten SLOs. These forms are then tabulated, so that we get results for each instructor as well as by type of section (arts, liberal arts, or mixed) for each of the outcomes. This allows us to systematically survey our strengths and weaknesses, which are then discussed at our faculty development meetings, in order to make changes the following year.

Our first year results are also leading to changes in the way we report them. Last year we said that grades of "A" or "B" exceeded the standards; "C" met, "D" approached, and "F" did not meet the standards. The result was a somewhat more rosy picture of student achievement in College Writing than was accurate. On the other hand, we probably overreported the number of failures, because we included withdrawal ("W") grades as well as withdrawal-failures ("WF"). This year, therefore, we're going to modify our reporting, by making only grades of "A" exceed the standards, while "Bs" and "Cs" will meet them, and by eliminating the "W" grades.

In closing, like the SUNY Faculty Senate, we support assessment for accountability, but that's not the main reason why the Purchase faculty does assessment. Our main reason for doing assessment is that we've found it to be one of the most powerful tools we have for the systematic improvement of student work. Assessment also produces a surprising amount of faculty discussion about student learning, which many faculty regard as an equally important and beneficial result of the assessment process. It is this focus on improving learning—both our students' and our own—which needs to be preserved as we move toward system-wide common measures in general education assessment. My hope is that our efforts at Purchase can make a contribution as we work with colleagues across SUNY toward alternative system-wide Basic Communication assessment that genuinely fosters and promotes student achievement. Thank you.

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Name _____

Date _____ Overall Grade _____

Criteria Sheet for Unit I First Draft

1. Writing Style: Do paragraphs clearly flow from one to another? Are there good transitions? Clear and correct sentence structure and grammar? Does that author stay on or stray from the topic?

A B C D F

2. Detail: Is the narrative sufficiently detailed in term of what happened--basic plot, characters, sights, sounds, feelings, description, what people said? Are examples and quotations used effectively?

A B C D F

3. Perspectives: Is the author's point of view effectively presented? Does the paper express and take seriously different points of view, besides the author's?

A B C D F

4. Cultural Analysis: Does the paper go beyond a personal point of view by relating it to larger social and cultural issues?

A B C D F

5. Interest level: Is the paper interesting to read? Does it convey a sense of the author's voice and the author as a real person involved in exploring significant issues? Does the paper encourage readers to take the author seriously?

A B C D F

THE FOLLOWING CRITERION WILL BE ADDED TO EVALUATE YOUR SECOND DRAFT:

6. Revision: Has the author made major revisions to this draft, incorporating additional material, adding detail and quotations, depth and complexity, and generally making the paper more persuasive and interesting to read?

CRITERIA SHEET FOR UNIT III PAPER

1. **Writing Style:** Do paragraphs clearly flow from one another? Are there smooth transitions? Clear and correct sentence structure, grammar, and diction?

A B C D F

2. **Opening Organizing Paragraph:** Does the author have a clear thesis, which serves as a controlling concept for the paper and is presented in the first paragraph? Does this thesis link, in interesting ways, ideas from the research and class texts with the author's own experiences and ideas? Does the first paragraph establish a ROADMAP for the paper? Do a draft of this paragraph at the beginning of your writing, but new ideas will come up as you write the paper, so you will need to revise the paragraph and your transitions AFTER YOU WRITE THE WHOLE PAPER.

A B C D F

3. **Original Argument, organization, and coherence:** Does the body of the paper continue the ideas asserted at the opening? Is it organized well or poorly? Does it have a clear position of its own, or is it just a summary of various research and readings, without developing an analytical argument? Is the argument articulated clearly and discussed in a systematic fashion with clear "point sentences" throughout the paper? Does the paper stay on topic or does it wander or go in and out of focus? Does it adequately address various aspects of the topic?

A B C D F

4. **Synthesis:** Does the author synthesize the various texts we have read by organizing them around particular ideas rather than by discussing them author by author? (YOU CANNOT GET CREDIT FOR ORGANIZING AUTHOR BY AUTHOR.) Your organization must be in terms of your controlling concepts, not authors.

A B C D F

5. **Cultural and Historical Analysis:** Does the paper employ cultural analysis, that is does it work to explore contemporary social and cultural tensions and contradictions, relating high school education to larger social issues? Does it employ Historical Analysis, that is does it work to explore similarities as well as differences that have developed over time. Does it analyze the significance of these similarities and differences?

A B C D F

6. **Detail and Quotations:** Is the paper sufficiently detailed, using and analyzing relevant examples both from the research and readings, and original examples that the author comes up with? Does the author quote from the class and research texts in relevant and interesting ways? Quotations cannot speak for you, but rather are used as evidence for what you say. So, assert something, then have a quotation for support, then explain why the quotation supports what you are asserting.

A B C D F

7. **Bibliography:** Does the paper use correct MLA citations and bibliographical format? See your handbook and the sample bibliography for formatting details.

A B C D F

8. **Interest Level:** Is paper interesting to read? Does it convey a sense of the author's voice and the author as a real person involved in exploring significant issues? Does paper encourage readers to take the author seriously?

A B C D F

9. **Revision:** Is it clear that the author has made major revisions to this draft, incorporating additional material, adding detail and quotations, depth and complexity, and generally making the paper more persuasive and interesting to read?

A B C D F