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## **WEBWRITE: A SUNY COLLABORATIVE TO ASSESS AND IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS.**

As you know, the Office of the Provost and Chancellor for Academic Affairs has tasked all SUNY institutions to develop assessment plans for their majors as well as for their General Education programs. In conjunction with this project, the General Education Assessment Review committee was established to both review General Education assessment plans as well as offer guidance in the construction of those plans. Under the purview of the GEAR group were plans concerning the ten knowledge and skills areas from Mathematics to the Arts, and the two infused competencies known as Critical Thinking and Information Management. The area my presentation today is primarily concerned with is the Knowledge and Skills Area entitled Basic Communication, specifically as it pertains to writing assessment.

Writing instruction in America has carried with it the burden of assessment since the earliest one-room school houses. The responsibility of that assessment rested with the writing instructor, aka the English teacher, and his or her authority in the matter was rarely questioned, even though his

or her qualifications for the task may have been somewhat suspect. Indeed, educators and students believed there was a right and wrong way to write, and the right way to write could be learned through exercise drills and rote memorization. The student would turn in his thesis and the teacher would compare it to the established thesis form (such as what we might now call the five-paragraph essay), using prescriptive grammar and spelling rules to determine the "correctness" of the writing. The purpose of the thesis was, therefore, a tool for demonstrating knowledge . . . knowledge of forms, grammar, spelling, and even handwriting rules.

Eventually, even higher education institutions, including Harvard, became concerned with the "correctness" of student compositions. It seems that once a new class (and an additional gender) of students was allowed into the American Academy, college students' writing skills were found woefully inadequate. Something had to be done. Many things were done over the next century, but little interrogation went into what was deemed "correct" or even whether or not "correctness" should be the ultimate goal of writing instruction. That is--until the last half of the twentieth century.

During the twentieth century a more complex and egalitarian higher education system was being developed, the population was dramatically increasing both in number and diversity, and the demand for higher

education was reaching what would have seemed astronomically high to the nineteenth century college English professor. In addition, paper and ink have become so available that they have become as taken for granted as trees once were. Mass media has reconstructed our ways of knowing, and the invention and mass production of the personal computer, now considered by the middle class as a household staple, has changed the very act of writing.

And yet, through all these changes, our standards for academic writing have remained rather stable. Not surprisingly, then, compositionists have found themselves in a state of crisis. As composition theory was focusing on pedagogies that encouraged generative strategies, peer review, collaboration, and writing to learn, our rubrics hardly changed from those used in the one-room schoolhouse. And when college students' writing skills were once again (or still) considered woefully inadequate by not only the academy but by other powerful outside interests, calls for accountability rang throughout the American Education System.

And yet, compositionists were not wholly unprepared. Whereas they may not have been well versed in statistics and other tools of the social sciences, they did have a long tradition of assessment practices. They had spent the last forty years developing composition theories and pedagogies that drew not only from the humanities, but also from the social sciences, the

natural sciences, the arts, etc. It was by its very nature an interdisciplinary discipline. What was needed, then, were writing assessment theories, methodologies, and rubrics that would align with twentieth century writing technologies and language diversities. Because it is evident that assessment cannot drive pedagogy, compositionists needed to find ways to more accurately articulate and reflect what students were accomplishing in their writing courses . . . a reconstruction, if you will, of what it meant to be "correct" that would meet twenty-first century needs.

The GEAR group has given writing programs in the SUNY system the opportunity to do just that. Through their Venture Funding Initiative, they, along with the SUNY Council on Writing and Suffolk Community College have sponsored the creation of a website that, with the active participation of SUNY institutions, will provide a dialogic space where writing programs can come together and through consensus as well as dissensus create dynamic writing assessment plans that best articulate their students' writing accomplishments. I am here today to both make you aware of this valuable resource, thank those who have already contributed, offer one strategy as to how to use the website to create an assessment plan, or more specifically a rubric, for your local institution, and encourage all SUNY institutions to become a part of this project known as Webwrite.

Webwrite is an electronic forum for the exchange of ideas regarding writing program requirements and outcomes assessment. The website address is <http://depthome.sunysuffolk.edu/webwrite>. However, if you forget to mark this site as a Favorite on your Home or Office computer, there are several ways to access it. You need only remember that it is hosted by Suffolk Community College. You can then either go to the SUNY website and click on Suffolk's homepage or go straight to Suffolk's homepage and click on Community Outreach. Then click on Webwrite. (You can also access it through the Search Engine by typing in Webwrite, writing, web, Council on Writing, or any word in the title. Unfortunately, our Search Engine is not yet set up to access the site using the key word assessment.) Of course, you can always e-mail me if you lose the address and I will send you the link.

Once you get to the website, you will notice a number of different features. First, you'll see the Navigation Window:

**Home** gives you a little information about the purpose of the Webwrite project.

**Council on Writing** gives you a little history and mission statement for the SUNY Council on Writing, or what we call SUNY COW.

**Discussion Forum** is a place where we can actually have dialog with each other regarding concerns, previous successes, failures, pedagogical concerns, Institutional Research demands, etc. (Show how to use it.)

**Resource Links--GEAR** a place you can go to find best practices and documents such as the "Report of the Provost's Advisory Task Force of the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes."

**Council on Writing Program Administrators** which is a national organization of professionals and faculty members interested in writing program administration. Here you will also find helpful position statements such as the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition and the statement on Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism.

**Commission on Higher Education/Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools** where you can find accreditation guidance and a website on assessment guidelines if you click on Publications, Guidelines for Improvement, and Assessment Website.

**Other Resource Links such as the NCTE, AAHE and the MLA**

**Comppile** which is an ongoing inventory of publications in post-secondary composition, rhetoric, ESL, and Technical Writing.

**Contact Us**--is Contact Me. You can feel free to contact me regarding any of these issues or problems with the website AND you can use this link to send me your writing assessment plans to be posted to the site.

Finally, **Select School**, which is the same Search Engine as to the right.

Now, let me offer one way this website might be used as a resource. I think if you were to examine each of the plans submitted, you would see a great deal of commonality amongst them. This is not surprising, as I mentioned, because of the field's long tradition of assessment practices. However, you will also notice some interesting innovations that are beginning to more directly tie into 21st century composition pedagogy.

For example, if you click on Suffolk's rubric, you will notice that among the traditional categories of development, organization, and expression, you will also find the categories of critical thinking, revision, and research incorporation. These are, of course, categories which have been mandated by SUNY, but they are also an acknowledgement that composition theory and pedagogy have changed over the last century and we need to be using new methods of inquiry to examine the impact of those changes. SUNY has wisely allowed local institutions and faculty to determine what it means to have "the ability to revise" and how that might

be demonstrated. Suffolk has defined it as the strong ability to re-vision the essay from draft to draft in areas of purpose, content, and organization and is not limited to basic proofreading skills. In other words, Suffolk sees revision as the ability to write from different perspectives rather than the simple "fixing" of technical errors. Thus, what we see is a hint towards current composition theory that suggests that writing should not be used merely as a tool for demonstrating knowledge, but instead should be used as a tool for generating knowledge. . . a move that takes writing instruction away from an audience-centered approach to a writer-centered (or student-centered) approach. Evaluators can no longer just look at the final product, they must also examine AND VALUE the student's process.

Now take a look at the rubric Purchase has posted, specifically in regard to research incorporation and critical thinking. Their rubric asks:

1. Does the author synthesize the various texts we have read by organizing them around particular ideas rather than discussing them author by author?

2. Does the paper employ Cultural Analysis, that is does it work to explore tensions and contradictions that exist in a particular time period, relating the fashion of the time to larger values of the time?

3. Does the paper employ Historical Analysis, that is does it work to explore similarities as well as differences that have developed over time and analyzing the significance of these similarities and differences (similarities are often more interesting in historical analysis; differences in cultural analysis).

4. Does the paper read texts of the past and the present symptomatically, that is, go beyond the literal meaning of what is being said or depicted and seeing the text as a symptom of something else that it doesn't want to or can't explicitly say?

Here we see indications of a subject-centered pedagogy--a pedagogy that suggests that the subject of writing is not a static object, but rather a dynamic discussion that requires intellectual engagement and positioning. In other words, this rubric gives a nod to what Kay Halasek in her book entitled *A Pedagogy of Possibility* describes as an epistemic rhetoric. She writes,

As a discipline, composition studies has over the past twenty years increasingly embraced the notion of rhetoric as epistemic and writing as a transactional meaning-making activity. (83)

She goes on to suggest that this subject-centered pedagogy would challenge students who are engaging in their writing assignments to ask themselves:

1. What are your initial positions on this subject? What sources inform your present positions? Why are these sources compelling for you?
2. How (and why) did reading this cultural text confirm, alter, or question your positions?

And so forth.

Thus we can see how Purchase has gone about constructing a rubric that would more accurately reflect their pedagogical theories and, in combination with research in the field, get new and various ideas for meeting the assessment demands of the State and other interested bodies.

There are many more examples on this website of how colleges have created rubrics and assessment methodologies which combine traditional strategies with innovational ideas. I have only offered a few here today. But what I hope I have demonstrated is that we do not have to create our writing assessment plans in the isolation of the one-room schoolhouse. We know, as academics, that knowledge comes from active interaction with research, interested colleagues, and finally the creative act. This website, I think, provides us with a space to do just that--if we will agree to interact.