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Collaborating Across Levels to Assess Dual Enrollment WRIT101: College Writing

The author leads collaborative assessment professional development with dual enrollment and Helena College faculty and describes their experiences and results.

Introduction

After the Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA) was retired in favor of the ACT Writing Assessment in 2012, I, too, retired and began working on grants part-time at Helena College. Coordinating Career Pathways, I was nostalgic for the satisfaction I had felt working with English teachers from about 135 high schools each year; watching the percentage of juniors able to produce proficient writing that placed them into college-level composition courses rise from 38% in 2001 to 74% in 2012; knowing that high school teachers and their students had learned to identify and develop the attributes of proficient writing that signify proficiency; and witnessing the decline in the percent of high school graduates placed into remedial writing courses: from a 14.6% to 8.4%. What I missed the most were the robust conversations about student writing with my colleagues.

Last year, I seized the opportunity to include a “Writing Assessment Norming Workshop” for high school Concurrent Enrollment (CE) and college teachers of WRIT101 College Writing in my Montana Career Pathways Grant Application. From the Pathways perspective, it is critical that students in CE courses are assessed by the same standards as those in college classrooms. Inviting high school teachers to come to the workshop was the easy part—they were eager to collaborate with other concurrent enrollment

teachers and college faculty to learn how well their students were performing in comparison to college students and to students in other concurrent enrollment classrooms. In addition, we had decided to invite Dr. Beverly Ann Chin, English Department Chair from The University of Montana, who had provided the Helena College English faculty with a workshop about the University-wide Program-level Writing Assessment the previous year and with whom many teachers had worked in the past.

My first task would be to develop a scoring protocol, including a rubric to reflect the published outcomes of WRIT101, since teachers were required to teach to these outcomes. The outcomes, ostensibly shared system-wide for WRIT101 College Writing follow:

Upon successful completion of the course, the student will be able to:

1. *Use writing as a means to engage in critical inquiry by exploring ideas, challenging assumptions, and reflecting on and applying the writing process.*
2. *Develop multiple, flexible strategies for writing. Particularly inventing, organizing, drafting, revising, and copyediting.*
3. *Demonstrate an understanding of research as a process of gathering, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate*

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primary and secondary sources. Integrate their own ideas with those of others.

4. *Formulate an assertion about a given issue and support that assertion with evidence appropriate to the issues, position taken, and given audience.*
5. *Demonstrate proficiency in the use of the conventions of language and forms of discourse, including grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics.*
6. *Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation and audience.*
7. *Read texts thoughtfully, analytically, and critically in preparation for writing task.*

Next, I gathered rubrics from high school and college instructors, comparing them to the WRIT101 Common Course Outcomes, asking for feedback, and drafting a rubric closely tied to those Common Course Numbering outcomes for WRIT101. Because we were examining only one writing sample from each student, we would be unable to fully evaluate outcomes 1, 2, and 7. Helena College faculty’s rubric, The University of Montana’s University-wide Program-level Writing Assessment Holistic Rubric, and several high school rubrics were four-point rubrics with 5-8 features. (Note: To access the UM Rubric, go to: http://www.umt.edu/facultysenate/committees/writing_committee/UPWA.php). The rubric began as a draft that incorporated elements of all these rubrics and the WRIT101 Outcomes. What follows is the final version, refined after we used it to score Anchor and Practice Sets.

Rubric for WRIT101 College Writing

(Based on Measurable Outcomes for use with a Sample of Writing)

Score 4 Advanced

Writer demonstrates a clear sense of purpose and ability to engage in deep, critical thought (exploring ideas, challenging assumptions, and

reflecting). Text is logical, coherent, and well-organized. Text demonstrates a clear ability to evaluate and use information effectively, synthesize concepts and integrate writer’s ideas with ideas from sources. Writer formulates a clear assertion, supported by evidence that is convincing, appropriate to the issues, position taken, and audience. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, a strong command of language is evident. Format, structure, and style are effective for the purpose and audience.

Score 3 Proficient

Writer generally demonstrates a sense of purpose and ability to engage in critical thought. Text is generally logical and organized. Text demonstrates the ability to evaluate and use information, synthesize concepts; with many of writer’s ideas integrated with ideas from sources. Writer makes an assertion, supported by evidence that is generally appropriate to the issues, position taken, and audience. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, understanding is minimally affected. Format, structure, and style are suitable for the purpose and audience.

Score 2 Nearing Proficiency

Writer’s purpose is somewhat unclear; thinking may be simplistic. Text may contain illogical connections, redundancies, and/or confusing organization. Text demonstrates an uneven ability to evaluate and use information, synthesize concepts or integrate writer’s ideas with ideas from sources. Writer’s assertion may be vague, and supporting evidence may be insufficient, irrelevant, or inappropriate for purpose and audience. A basic control of language is apparent, even though frequent errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics may occasionally hinder understanding. Format, structure, and style are sometimes ineffective for purpose and audience.

Score 1 Novice

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Writer's purpose is unclear; thinking is superficial or uncritical. Text contains several illogical connections, redundancies, and/or confusing organization. Text demonstrates an inability to evaluate and use information, synthesize concepts and integrate writer's ideas with ideas from sources. Writer may not make an assertion, and supporting evidence is lacking, irrelevant, or inappropriate for purpose and audience. Problems with language are apparent; and frequent errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics impede understanding. Format, structure, and style are ineffective for purpose and audience.

After the end of Fall Semester, we asked college and concurrent enrollment teachers of WRIT101 to send us the papers written by their students in the final weeks of the semester, either on paper or electronically. I combed through these papers, primarily research, to find anchor and practice papers. Once I had scored several prospective samples and written annotations, I asked two college instructors and Dr. Chin to corroborate scores, select the most useful papers and help refine the annotations. For the workshop, we selected four pre-scored anchor papers and five pre-scored practice papers. Even the development and layout of scoresheets presented a small challenge, including how to number the tests in a way that would be easy to sort from a data perspective, while masking student identity.

Finally, I put together packets with the training sets, score sheets, and unscored samples that mixed high school and college student papers. I chose to include three papers from a high school teacher who did not require a formal research paper, thinking that all the Concurrent Enrollment teachers who submitted papers should be represented. In retrospect, that may have been a mistake, since those papers scored low. Conversely, because research is integral to WRIT101, the results of this assessment may ensure that all WRIT101 teachers emphasize the research outcomes of “synthesizing resources” and “supporting assertions with evidence.”

Workshop

On April 13, 2018, four WRIT101 instructors from Helena College, the Helena College Library Director, Dr. Chin, and I (Career Pathways Coordinator) met with seven WRIT101 instructors from five high schools for training and scoring. Those seven high school teachers deserve special commendations:

- Heather Parrish, Capital High School
- Jonna Schwartz, Helena High School
- Mike Hesford and Brittani Bergtoll, Jefferson High School
- Tammi Allison and Rene Connor, Missoula Sentinel High School
- Meredith Jacobson, Granite High School

Scorers were assigned to four tables, with a mix of high school and college instructors at each table. Discussions surrounding the Anchor and Practice Papers consumed the entire morning. In these conversations, instructors questioned the assigned scores, the annotations, and the apparent reasoning, organization, use of references, and clarity exhibited in the student papers. Even the annotation for the Score 4 Anchor Paper created some controversy, as scorers agreed that the parenthetical “even if it appears” be added to appease those who preferred a thesis statement in the first paragraph:

The writer has a clear sense of purpose and engages in critical thought. Text is logical and generally well-organized, with an introductory paragraph, followed by a thesis statement (even if it appears) in the second paragraph. The writer uses information effectively, integrating ideas from sources into his/her own. The writer makes a clear assertion, supported by appropriate evidence. Although usage and punctuation could be improved in a couple of spots, a good command of language is evident. Format, structure, and style are effective for purpose and audience.

This discussion was informed by Outcome #2, “develop flexible strategies for writing” that

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include “organizing.” In addition to organization, aspects of research were critical to the table conversations. Unlike the MUSWA, an integral scoring feature in this rubric is the writer’s ability to “evaluate and use information effectively, synthesize concepts and integrate writer’s ideas with ideas from sources.” Many of the papers that were scored, including those in the Anchor and Practice Sets illustrated students’ challenges with using resources effectively. One Annotation describes the problem in this way: “The evidence is sparse and not well-integrated with the writer’s ideas. For example, the opposing view discussion is rather ineffective (and incorrectly cited).”

In another Annotation, “The writer’s thesis statement promises to examine three reasons for the assertion, but the second paragraph with opposing views synthesizes ideas from sources more effectively than the three paragraphs designed to support the assertion.” Considering the evidence, scorers wished that the student had actually taken the opposite position, since his evidence to the contrary was so convincing.

The annotation for Practice Paper Score 4 describes an otherwise excellent paper with a common issue:

*The writer has a clear purpose and systematically explores the issue of depression in adolescents. Text is logical, coherent, and well-organized. Although the writer uses information effectively, **it is not clear that he/she integrated his/her own ideas into those of sources.** There is a clear assertion (to understand depression to treat) supported by convincing evidence, properly cited. A strong command of language is evidence. Style and format are effective for purpose and audience.*

Although “novice” in almost every feature, the writer described in the following annotation managed to integrate his ideas into the research: *The writer’s purpose is unclear; ideas are confused by incoherent sentences. The text is generally organized (chronologically). The writer integrates his/her ideas with ideas from sources, but these ideas are not cited correctly, and include no scholarly sources. The writer’s assertion is vague, clouded by*

what appears to be excessive use of a thesaurus. Word choice and awkward sentences impede understanding. Format and style are not suitable for the purpose and audience.

As we scored papers at our table, Helena College instructor Virginia Reeves, Meredith Jacobson and I debated whether students should “integrate their ideas into the research” or “integrate the research into their own ideas.” One of our student writers clung tenaciously to an assertion while citing ample evidence to refute the claim. Perhaps the stubbornness of sticking to a position against the odds reflects our society in general! Research should begin with a question, not a stance.

Students need to present their research while integrating their own reflections and experiences, so they have not simply strung together a collection of quotations and paraphrases from their sources. This is difficult, high-level thinking, which should distinguish college-level writing and which appeared in these writing samples less often than we expected.

Consensus scoring (in which everyone at the table scored eight papers) and individual scoring of 65 papers completed the afternoon session, which ended with evaluations. In fact, it was the afternoon of scoring that generated many of the comments written into the workshop evaluations, such as:

“The most useful part of the workshop was:

- Discussing discrepancies in scoring in order to develop consistency
- Working with professionals from other schools
- Discussions about the uses/limitations of rubrics
- Shining a light on scoring priorities and practices through professional dialogue”.

Dr. Chin wrote: “I was impressed and inspired by the lively, respectful conversations about student writing among the college faculty and dual enrollment high school teachers. This norming workshop provided wonderful professional

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development for educators committed to improving student writing. As we applied the holistic rubric to student papers, we learned how to recognize our own preferences (and biases) in our teaching and assessing of writing. We also affirmed the importance of sharing rubrics with our students so they can assess their own writing strengths and areas for improvement."

Results

If unable to reach consensus, scorers were allowed to assign half-scores (such as 2.5) and agree among themselves on a score halfway between two score points. The four-point rubric described a score of 4 as Advanced; 3 as Proficient; 2 as Nearing Proficiency, and 1 as Novice. We scored roughly 1/3 of the papers that had been collected. Using all 74 papers that were scored, 39 from the college setting and 35 from the high school setting, the papers were distributed by score as follows:

- 9 papers scored 4;
- 1 paper scored 3.5;
- 20 papers scored 3 6 papers scored 2.5;
- 25 papers scored 2;
- 3 papers scored 1.5; and
- 9 papers scored 1.

The overall average was 2.432; with high school students averaging a score of 2.385 and college students averaging 2.474. However, if one does not include three papers from one high school that were not technically research papers, the high school average would have been 2.481 and the overall average would have been 2.478. Although this may be a more accurate comparison because the rubric includes integrating "ideas from sources" and "use information effectively" in the descriptions of proficient writing, the following data includes all papers scored.

If we consider a score of 2.5 and above as "Proficient," 62% of the papers were scored above the Proficient benchmark, 38% were "Nearing Proficiency," and 14% were "Novice."

Average scores were also broken down by the instructor from which papers were submitted.

Students of the four college instructors had average scores as follows: Instructor A: 2.1; B: 2.3; C: 2.7; and D: 2.9. Students of the five high school teachers had average scores as follows: Teacher A: 1.3; B: 2.0; C: 2.2; D: 2.8; and E: 2.9.

As a "Norming" Workshop, the other important findings to consider involve inter-rater reliability. Of the 65 papers that were not pre-scored, 25 (38%) were scored with Perfect Agreement (all scorers assigned the same score). Only 6 papers (9%) could be classified as Discrepant (in which one or more scorers assigned scores with a two-point range). Three of the discrepant papers had scores ranging from 1 to 3; three were scores ranging from 2 to 4. All other papers (34, or 52%) were assigned Adjacent Scores. By comparison, in the last year of the Montana University System Writing Assessment, which devoted an entire day to training, depended on 305 mostly-experienced scorers, and used a six-point rubric, there were 62% Perfect Agreements, 36% Adjacent, and 1.6% Discrepant. It should be easier to achieve high inter-rater reliability with a four-point scoring scale than a six-point scale. At the same time, including features related to research complicates the scoring process.

Four college faculty, seven high school faculty, and three administrators scored papers. College faculty assigned 53 scores, averaging a 2.5 score. High school faculty assigned 90 scores, also averaging 2.5. Administrators assigned 35 scores, averaging a 2.4 score. Interesting to note is that individual college faculty's average assigned scores ranged from 2.2 to 2.7; individual high school faculty's average scores ranged from 2.2 to 2.8; and administrators' averages ranged from 1.9 to 2.8. Can any conclusions be drawn from this data, except that college and high school faculty scorers were in close agreement?

Participants also received their own students' scores and overall averages to help self-assess their own practices. Both high school and college instructors were grateful to see how their own students, as a group, performed in comparison to the mean; and everyone was relieved that there

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were no significant disparities between high school and college students, or between high school and college scorers. One of the college instructors told me that this workshop has inspired him to make a change in his research paper assignments. Perhaps others may also change their practice to improve results.

Conclusions

Because the total number of papers scored is relatively small, these conclusions are limited. However, if the sample of papers was sufficiently random, as intended, we can conclude that dual-enrolled high school students in WRIT101 are performing at about the same level as college students in WRIT101 on campus or online. Because the average seems low and there were more 2's (Nearing Proficiency) than 3's (Proficient), all WRIT101 instructors should work to improve their students' writing skills—or perhaps focus more on the WRIT101 Outcomes as articulated in the CCN Outcomes and this WRIT101 Rubric. In addition, college and high school faculty appear to be evaluating student work equally.

Workshop evaluations indicated unanimous agreement that this workshop was valuable and nearly every participant suggested that this WRIT101 Norming Workshop be repeated annually. Participants overwhelmingly commented about the value of their professional discussions, the benefits of connecting across schools and levels, and their gratitude for the workshop.

Recommendations were primarily about the timing of the workshop and included suggestions about using essays or other types of writing rather than research papers. Despite the overwhelming recommendation to repeat the norming workshop, this activity was not approved for funding in the 2018-19 Career Pathways grant, because overall funding was reduced statewide. However, with the rubric developed and tested, and a training protocol established, costs to repeat these Norming Workshops with college and their

high school partners could be minimal. Teachers may need to have their substitute teachers and travel reimbursed, but perhaps (as was the case with the MUSWA), school districts would absorb those costs.

According to Beverly Chin, "The Writing Assessment Norming Workshop embodied many important aspects of collaboration and professional development. First, Helena College faculty, Jan Clinard, and Beverly Chin adapted UM-Missoula's University-wide Program-level Writing Assessment Holistic Rubric to match the Helena College WRIT 101 Learning Outcomes. Second, the Helena College faculty and dual enrollment high school faculty read and collaboratively scored papers from WRIT 101 courses. Third, during the norming workshop, the college faculty and high school instructors had rich, focused, and productive discussions about similarities and differences in their respective WRIT 101 courses." We hope the conversations among high school and college instructors of College Writing will continue as we strive to improve student writing, ensure that Concurrent Enrollment students are held to the same standards as their college peers, and build a community of writing instructors who can share their experiences, frustrations, and achievements in forums such as those provided by MATELA.

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