

Gauging Student Learning Outcomes in Composition

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During a recent semester, student writing in sophomore-level literature survey classes caused us to wonder how well we were teaching our composition classes at North Georgia College and State University (NGCSU). On essay exams, students demonstrated extremely uneven writing skills. Some students wrote well; however, some had minor grammatical and mechanical problems, some had difficulty developing ideas adequately, some had difficulty focusing arguments and organizing ideas, and several had difficulty in all of these areas. The unevenness of writing skills raised questions about how well some of these students had fared in the two first-year composition classes and whether those classes adequately prepare students as writers for complex tasks. Freshmen composition classes are crucial; students need to write well throughout their courses in college and later in their careers. Therefore, the question is raised: does the NGCSU composition program do what it is supposed to do?

In an attempt to answer that question, the Committee on Composition Programs is developing a new assessment tool to gauge whether we are achieving the desired learning outcomes in our English composition programs. Although we have applied the tool in only one class, the results suggest that our current assessment project is worthy. This project is part of ongoing efforts to assess learning within our department, where we have benefited from several previous assessments. Traditionally, NGCSU has assessed its composition program by tracking the results of the Regents' Testing Program. The Regents' Testing Program results reassure us that we have students who, for the most part, write well, but the results say little about the efficacy of our writing program since the test measures writing at the eleventh-grade level. Therefore, the results may or may not relate to what students learn in composition classes.

Another assessment measure of the composition program has been a review of the grades awarded in 1101 and 1102 by instructors. NGCSU has had a minimal standard for its two first-year composition

courses for years. These minimal requirements look at a range of skills, including formulating and supporting a thesis, constructing grammatically correct sentences, and documenting material taken from other sources. The policy further notes that "Achievement above the minimal passing level with a grade of A, B, or C results from exceeding minimum expectations in terms of essay development, approach to the text, and quality of both thought and content." While the policy remains intact and while instructor grades range around a C average, a statistical analysis in 1996 suggested that grade inflation had set in over the years because there were more B's than had been previously awarded.

For the last dozen years, the English faculty has also used grading sessions as an assessment measure. The faculty meets regularly to discuss grading policies, focusing its discussion on a set of six or seven 1101 and 1102 essays graded individually before the meeting. The only other form of traditional assessment is informal word-of-mouth or anecdotal evidence. Indeed, NGCSU has not conducted a comprehensive assessment of how well its composition classes prepare students for writing in upper-level courses.

Furthermore, several factors enter into students' performance in our upper-level courses that assessing English 1101 and 1102 at our institution cannot measure because many students do not take these courses at NGCSU. Instead, they may earn credit for the first-year composition courses by testing or transfer. A few students—in 1998 there were five—earn ETS Advanced Placement credit on either the English Language and Composition test for 1101 or the English Literature and Composition test for 1102. Even fewer earn CLEP credit, either on the Composition, Freshman College test for 1101 or the English Literature test for 1102. A larger number of students earn credit by transfer. Some transfer in at the sophomore or junior levels, having already taken the freshmen-level composition courses. Additionally, a relatively large number of students—some 144 last summer—take either one or both of the courses at another institution as transient students and transfer

the credit back to NGCSU.

Our current assessment project began, then, with the task of assessing the preparation of students for writing in upper-level English courses by first selecting one class of English 2111 (World Literature I) students. The writing samples we chose to analyze were part of the regular midterm exam for this class, which required students to write two short in-class essays. These writing samples were scored using a set of criteria and guidelines that the composition committee developed for assessing writing skills. Using these guidelines, each midterm in-class essay was rated for content, grammar, and organization, in that order, with each element receiving a rating from one (1) to three (3). The criteria are detailed below:

Criteria for Rating Writing Proficiency in 2000-level English Literature Survey Classes

- 1. Inadequate writing skills
- 2. Adequate writing skills
- 3. Above adequate writing skills

Level 1: Inadequate Writing Skills

Content

- Writer does not support thesis, inadequately providing or developing evidence.
- Writing is not interesting or informative, inadequately providing or developing evaluation that relates ideas to the larger context

Grammar

- Writer does not construct grammatically correct sentences using Standard American English and avoiding error at the sentence level and in agreement and spelling.
- Writer does not use clear and precise language, avoiding awkwardness.

Organization

- Writer does not formulate a thesis.
- Writer does not provide adequate transitions and does not stay coherent with the topic.

Level 2: Adequate Writing Skills

Content

- Writer supports thesis by providing adequate evidence but develops evidence minimally.
- Writing is interesting and informative, but evaluation only minimally relates ideas to the larger context.

Grammar

- Writer may make occasional mistakes, but consistently constructs grammatically correct sentences using Standard American English.
- Writer uses clear and precise language, avoiding awkwardness, but does not consistently use a sophisticated style.

Organization

- Writer clearly formulates a thesis.
- Writer provides adequate transitions and minimally relates ideas to the topic.

Level 3: Above Adequate Writing Skills

Content

- Writer supports the thesis by fully providing adequate evidence and developing its implications.
- Writing is interesting and informative; it fully explores connections between ideas and the larger context.

Grammar

- Writer has few if any distracting mistakes; consistently constructs grammatically correct sentences using Standard American English.
- Writer uses clear and precise language, avoiding awkwardness, but does not consistently use a sophisticated style.
- Writer uses clear and precise language, avoiding awkwardness, and consistently uses a sophisticated style.

Organization

- Writer clearly formulates a thesis.
- Writer develops sophisticated transitions and coherently relates ideas to the topic.

A list of the students was then compiled which included the students' ratings for both of the midterm essay questions, whether or not they had earned credit for 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU, and their grades for these courses if taken at NGCSU. Two examples of this procedure follow:

Assessment Examples:

Number	Locations	Mid-term Scores (Content, Grammar, Organization)
4	NG/NG B/C	2/1/2, 1/2/2
5	??/?/?	2/2/2, 1/2/2

Then, the scores for each student were averaged for each individual component (content, grammar, or organization) as well as the total essay score. Finally, using simple statistical tools, the scores were compared by group, with two comparisons being made: the first comparing essay scores for students who completed 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU with students who did not: and the second comparing essay scores for students who earned a C or better in 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU with students who did not complete 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU. Following are charts displaying the resulting data.

Comparison of Essay Scores for Students Who Completed 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU With Scores for Students Who Did Not

Means for Student Groups	Total Score	Content	Grammar	Org.
NGCSU (n=23)	5.28	1.65	1.76	1.87
Non-NGCSU (n=14)	4.96	1.50	1.75	1.71
Difference	0.32	0.15	0.01	0.16

Comparison of Essay Scores for Students Who Completed 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU With Grades of C or Better With Scores for Students Who Did Not Complete 1101 and 1102 at NGCSU

Means for Student Groups	Total Score	Content	Grammar	Org.
NGCSU (n=23)	5.33	1.67	1.76	1.90
Non-NGCSU (n=14)	4.96	1.50	1.75	1.71
Difference	0.37	0.17	0.01	0.19

As these charts show, the NGCSU groups scored higher in all areas, but given the small differences and sample sizes, the likelihood that these differences are statistically significant is almost nonexistent. Also, our analysis revealed that neither the NGCSU group nor the non-NGCSU group scored as having adequate content, grammar, or organization skills (which would

equal an average score of at least 2.0). Given the tentativeness of this data as well as the exploratory design of our study at this point, we are hesitant to be too bold with interpreting our data. Instead, we are using these results to suggest future directions for our project, and we have determined three areas of interest. First, it is clear that a larger and more representative sample will be needed in future assessments to gauge student writing skills. Second, the results indicate that there may be a potentially significant problem with students’ abilities to fulfill ENGL 1102 minimal standards in 2000-level literature courses across the board. Whether the 2111 scores represent a failure to learn minimal standards in the 1101 and 1102 sequence or reflect a regression of writing skills remains to be examined. Third, thus far there is a small statistical advantage in the scores of NGCSU students over the students who took 1101 and 1102 elsewhere, and we would like to determine whether that difference could be validated with a larger sample size.

As one follow-up to our pilot study, we are currently using the same methods to analyze student writing in another sophomore-level survey class. Additionally, we are using an adaptation for an English 1102 class to see if there is a correlation between writing skills and grades awarded in English 1101. We plan to track that group of students through English 1102 and through their sophomore-level literature survey classes. On a larger scale, we hope to extend our project to assessing student writing in the Writing Intensive courses. NGCSU’s Writing Across the Curriculum Policy states “No student shall receive a four-year degree from NGCSU without having completed two courses designated as writing intensive . . . At least one of the courses must be in the student’s academic major.” Eventually, we hope to determine whether grades in those courses correlate with the grades students received in English courses taken at NGCSU. As our project continues, we look forward to expanding what we currently know about student learning in our composition courses at NGCSU and using that knowledge to bring about the kind of changes that can result from thoughtful and thorough assessments.