USF
UNIVERSITY of SAN FRANCISCO

Educating Minds and Hearts to Change the World

Rhetoric and Composition Essay Assessment Results

Office of Institutional Assessment
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Background and Purpose:

The primary goal of USF's Program in Rhetoric and Composition is to provide freshmen with a foundation in the literacy skills necessary to full participation in a range of academic, professional, and civic communities. Our freshman writing sequence (RC 110 and 120) and our freshman written and oral communication sequence (RC 130 and 131) are specifically designed and intended to serve as a bridge between high school and college-level written discourses, a challenging transition that requires the development of new habits and strategies not only in the production of written texts but also in critical reading and thinking, analysis of dense texts, synthesis of complex ideas, reasoned argumentation, and library and electronic research.

To help prepare students for these challenges of college-level work, our year-long freshman course sequences work toward five core learning outcomes (Core Area A2 in the USF Core Curriculum). These are as follows:

A. *Critical analysis of academic discourse*: Students critically analyze linguistic and rhetorical strategies used in long and complex texts from a variety of genres, subjects, and fields.

B. *Integrating multiple academic sources*: Students incorporate multiple texts of length and complexity within a unified argumentative essay, addressing connections and differences among them.

C. *Academic research:* Students develop sophisticated research questions and compose substantial arguments in response to those questions, incorporating extensive independent library research and demonstrating mastery of standard academic documentation modes.

D. *Style:* Students edit their own prose to achieve a clear and mature writing style in keeping with the conventions of academic and/or professional discourse.

E. *Revision:* Students develop their own revision strategies for extending and enriching early drafts and for producing polished advanced academic writing.

In order to ensure that our students meet these goals, the Program in Rhetoric and Composition provides faculty teaching its freshman courses with curricular guidelines, including assignment constraints (e. g., number and length of papers, suggested quantities of reading), required and recommended texts, and principles for assessing and grading student work. Individual instructors are expected to design courses and assignments that will guide their students toward the above outcomes.

Yet in addition to preparing our instructors to teach course content that will lead to these learning outcomes, we also seek an understanding of the degree to which students are acquiring the skills, habits, and knowledge we try to impart. To this end, we initiated (at the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year) a project designed to assess our success in communicating our curriculum to our students.

Method:

In order to assess the degree to which our freshman writing program is helping students meet the outcomes presented above, during the 2006-2007 academic year, we collected sample first essays from fall semester sections of RC 110 and 130 (the first semester courses in the two sequences) and final essays from spring semester sections of RC 120 and 131 (the second semester courses in the two sequences). During the fall 2006 semester, two students from each section of RC 110 and 130 were randomly selected. Copies of these students' first essays (with grade and comments but without names) were collected by the Program in Rhetoric and Composition. At the end of the spring 2007 semester, these same students' final essays for RC 120 and 131 (with grades and comments but without names) were also collected. Due to the usual attrition that occurs as students pass from one course to another (e. g., students failing the first course, dropping either course, electing not to take the second-semester course in the spring, withdrawing or transferring from the university), we did not receive second essays from some students. In the end, we collected 31 pairs of 110-120 essays, and 18 pairs of 130-131 essays.

During the fall 2007 semester, we began the process of reading and assessing the collected essays. Each essay was read twice, each time by a different reader. Also, readers recused themselves from reading work they recognized to be that produced by their own students. Readers assessed the degree to which each essay displayed evidence of the student's achieving four of the five stated learning outcomes, rating each essay's performance in relation to each outcome on a scale of 0 (no evidence of mastery) to 3 (strong evidence of mastery). For each essay, the two readers' scores were combined to yield a final score on a scale of zero (0) to six (6). (See Appendix for rubric and grading charts.)

Through this process, we hoped to determine the degree to which students' work and experience during our first-year writing and writing/speaking sequences enabled them to meet our core learning outcomes. More specifically, we hoped to see an overall improvement in scores (and therefore evidence of students having met learning outcomes) as students moved from the beginning of the first-semester course to the end of the second-semester course.

We also hoped to determine whether this assessment of essays out of the context of students' other work (and without the context of written assignment guidelines or constraints, as well as of other factors such as course reading) would provide us with a sufficient basis upon which to assess both students' progress and the effectiveness of our curriculum (both in its conception and in its execution).

We determined at the outset that the assessment method described above would not allow us to assess our fifth learning outcome, revision (E). Not having required instructors to provide us with both drafts and final versions of the essays, we would not have been able to determine the degree to which students revised their work for final presentation. This absence of any assessment of revision may lead to a refinement of the assessment process (e. g., asking instructors to provide both draft and final versions of sample papers).

Results for 110-120 Sequence:

On average, 120 essay scores were significantly higher than 110 essay scores in the first three outcome categories. The strongest gains occurred in categories B and C, while category D saw only a moderate increase.

For outcome area A (Critical analysis of academic discourse), the average 110 essay score was 2.03. The average 120 essay score was 3.29. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 1.26 (62 %).

For outcome area B (Integrating multiple academic sources), the average 110 score was 1.06. The average 120 essay score was 3.58. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 2.52 (237 %).

For outcome area C (Academic research), the average 110 essay score was 0.67. The average 120 essay score was 3.32. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 2.65 (395 %).

For outcome area D (Style), the average 110 essay score was 3.29. The average 120 essay score was 3.9. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 0.61 (18.5 %).

Initial Comments and Observations:

Overall, the numerical rankings suggest fairly strongly that students are being assigned and are attempting increasingly challenging literacy tasks as they progress from first to second-semester college writing. At the very least, these increases seem to show that our curriculum, as delivered in individual sections and in the classroom, does in fact require and provide practice in four of the five areas of academic literacy we have identified as crucial. This assessment therefore points to the general success of our program in meeting its core learning outcomes.

The increase in scores from 110 to 120 may also suggest that students are gaining proficiency overall in critical analysis, integration of sources, academic research, and style. However, while the numerical results generally suggest that students progressed significantly toward meeting our learning outcomes (particularly analysis, integrating sources, and academic research), this assessment must be qualified for at least two reasons. First, since many instructors present an initial RC 110 assignment that requires little or no analysis, integration of sources, or research, while the final RC 120 essay frequently requires extensive research and use of sources, student gains in these categories may be exaggerated by our scores. That is, 110 essays will score very low in these categories not because the students performed poorly or could not demonstrate the relevant aptitude, but because they were not asked by the assignment to do so. It would perhaps be more revealing to compare 110 essays that required research and integration of sources with 120 essays that did the same. On the other hand, the results of this assessment may also suggest that RC 110 courses could (and perhaps should) more often begin with a higher level of engagement with argumentative and analytical tasks.

Second, our rubric for scoring the essay did not allow us always to assess the quality or effectiveness of students' use of texts, sources, or research, but rather primarily the mere presence of those in the student texts. For example, essays could receive a score of 2 out of 3 on

category A (Critical analysis of academic discourse) simply for summarizing or paraphrasing a couple of texts. Also, our rubric was perhaps not detailed enough to account for different ways in which an outcome could be met. For example, which essay would score higher on "integration of sources," one that integrated two sources very capably or one that integrated a dozen somewhat superficially? Some fine-tuning of the rubric to account for assessing both quality and quantity of these features in student work seems necessary.

On other hand, in some cases, student scores may be artificially low. Many instructors naturally and rightly do not attempt to address every learning outcome in every assignment. For example, it is very common to devote an early 120 essay assignment to the close critical analysis of one or two difficult texts, meeting outcome A and to some extent outcome B. However, a lengthy research-based essay, in which sources are integrated not necessarily for the purpose of analysis but as supporting evidence or perhaps to provide points of view to which the writer responds, may seem to contain a low degree of linguistic or rhetorical analysis (so that they do not substantially address outcome A). In this case, scores for outcome A in 120 essays may in fact be too low to represent the progress students make in critical analysis in that course. An assessment method in which we could see more than one assignment per course would better allow us to evaluate the degree to which students met all, not just some, of the outcomes.

The gains from 110 to 120 in outcome D (Style) again seem the most modest. Nevertheless, this assessment seems less qualified by some of the concerns above, as we were able to look directly at the students' grammar and syntax. Also, it is generally agreed by scholars of literacy and composition that as students progress towards more challenging academic writing tasks, they tend to exhibit more formal errors. If this is the case, then simply maintaining a level of quality in style from 110 to 120 would constitute improvement, and in fact the essay scores did increase in this category.

Once again, we were unable using this method of assessment to address the degree to which students were learning to revise essays on whole-text, paragraph, and sentence levels. Sample essays that included drafts – or perhaps portfolios – would enable us to do so.

Results for 130-131 Sequence:

On average, 131 essay scores were significantly higher than 130 essay scores in outcomes B and C (integrating sources and academic research). Outcome D (style) saw only a moderate increase, and scores for outcome A (critical analysis) stayed roughly the same.

For outcome area A (Critical analysis of academic discourse), the average 130 essay score was 3.89. The average 131 essay score was 3.83. Students' performance therefore decreased by a margin of 0.6 (1.5 %).

For outcome area B (Integrating multiple academic sources), the average 130 score was 2.44. The average 131 essay score was 3.56. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 1.12 (46 %).

For outcome area C (Academic research), the average 130 essay score was 0.72. The average 131 essay score was 3.06. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 2.34 (325 %).

For outcome area D (Style), the average 130 essay score was 3.78. The average 131 essay score was 4. Students on average therefore improved by a margin of 0.22 (6 %).

The above statistics suggest that students in the 130-131 Speaking and Writing Sequence are in fact reaching four of the five main learning outcomes for the course. More specifically, significant progress is indicated in the skill areas of integrating sources and conducting academic research. As was the case in our assessment of the 110-120 essays, however, this interpretation of the results of our scoring should be qualified. The lower scores for 130 essays reflects not so much a failure to integrate sources or a lack of substantial research as they do the appropriate design of early-semester assignments focusing on response to and integration of a limited number (often one) of sources provided by the instructor. In other words, the higher scores assigned to the 131 essays do indeed demonstrate that students in that course met outcomes B and C, yet the lower 130 scores should not be taken to indicate that students had previously failed in attempts at source integration and research. The other limitations in our rubric (described in the previous 110-120 section) also should be noted in any examination.

The similarity between 130 and 131 scores for outcome A, critical analysis, may initially seem to suggest lack of progress in that area. However, once again, any analysis of these scores should take into account that writing instructors frequently emphasize different writing skills and tasks in different assignments. For example, initial assignments for 130 frequently require focus upon and analysis of a single text or a small number of texts. In contrast, final 131 assignments will require the use of a larger number and wider range of sources less as objects of critical analysis and more as sources of supporting evidence or opposing arguments. In the latter case, sources would be mined for content rather than scrutinized for rhetorical strategies. In short, an equal or lower degree of analysis in the 131 assignment suggests not a lack of progress in the development of analytical skills but a difference in writing tasks assigned. In fact, the high 130 scores in critical analysis are a positive sign that critical reading and rhetorical analytical skills are being taught and practiced early in those students' college careers.

As was the case for the 110-120 students, gains in outcome D (style) were modest from fall to spring semester. Again, however, such consistency might be viewed as a gain, since composition scholarship generally shows that errors and awkwardness typically increase as students take on lengthier and more complex writing tasks.

Suggestions for Future Assessment:

After reading and scoring these essays, we all agree that the rubric according to which the essays were scored should be revised. Most specifically, written guidelines for numerical scores should be expanded to account for degrees of effectiveness in meeting outcomes. For example, an essay receiving a score of 1 for outcome area A (Critical Analysis) would refer to a text but neither explain nor summarize it, while an essay receiving a score of 2 would paraphrase or summarize the text without analyzing it, and one receiving a score of 3 would include analysis of a text for its rhetorical strategies. While these different scores reflect the presence or absence of analytical

or critical response, they do not allow for differentiation between a superficial response (that nevertheless moves beyond mere summary) and a more thoughtful one. Guidelines for numerical scores should also be revised or expanded to account for varying ways to meet the same numerical score. For example, an essay receiving a score of 0 for outcome area B (Integrating sources) is described on the current grid as containing or referring to no sources, while an essay receiving a score of 1 uses "some" sources but does not integrate them "acceptably." In addition, an essay receiving a score of 2 integrates several sources successfully. It is not clear what score should be assigned to an essay that integrates only one or two sources but does so very well. The scoring guide could be revised, for example, to account for such an essay, perhaps assigning a score of 1, since the hypothetical essay (which in fact resembles many of the actual essays we read) integrates only one source but in way that could not be categorized as "unacceptable" or only "marginally" acceptable.

Such revisions to the scoring grid would undoubtedly make our assessment of individual essays more reliable. However, it would not address one of the primary shortcomings of the method of simply collecting a year's first and last essays. That is, such a method both fails to account for the ways in which instructors develop distinct, often sequenced writing assignments to address different learning outcomes separately and misrepresents "writing" as a uniform process that remains constant in every assignment and every rhetorical situation. In other words, different assignments within the same course ask for different kinds of work and address different learning outcomes or combinations of learning outcomes. For example, an RC 120 course may start with an assignment requiring the critical analysis of a single difficult text or several such texts (addressing outcome A and perhaps outcome B). The second assignment might require students to compose an argument incorporating several academic sources read in common and perhaps limited research (addressing outcome B primarily, though not necessarily C), and third assignment would require the planning and composition of an extensive written argument incorporating significant outside research (addressing outcomes B and C, but not necessarily A). (All essays would require students to meet outcomes D and E.)

Instead of contorting courses, assignment sequences, and learning outcomes to fit the above assessment process, it may prove more productive to develop a portfolio method of assessment in which a student's work for a given course can be assessed in its entirety and holistically. Such a method would enable readers not only to examine multiple examples of student work (examples that meet different outcomes); it would also allow readers to assess the trajectory of a student's development (which is not always uniform or even) more closely and fully through various assignments. Finally, it would also allow for the assessment of outcome E, Revision, which all serious writing programs and instructors see as a complex and essential feature of any writing curriculum.

Appendix 1: Rubric Scoring Sheet

Rhetoric and Composition
First Year Writing Evaluation

Paper Identification Number: _____ Reading #1 or #2 (Please circle one choice)

Evaluation Rubrics:

Learning Outcome	Rubric Scoring Levels				110/ 130	120/ 131
	0	1	2	3		
Analysis/Reading Comprehension	No text referred to in the paper.	Text is referred to but not explained or summarized.	Text is paraphrased or summarized but not analyzed for effective writing strategies.	Paper critically analyzes linguistic and rhetorical strategies in complex texts.		
Integrating Sources	No sources in paper	Some sources used but unacceptable or marginally acceptable integration	Several sources used to adequately support argument	Multiple texts of length and complexity are coherently synthesized within a unified argument		
Academic Research	No research	Simplistic research question and/or inadequate amount of research to address the question. Documentation may be incomplete or inadequate.	Adequate amount of research incorporated into the paper to support the inquiry. Documentation should be reasonably adequate including in-text and works cited (MLA)or references (APA) pages.	Sophisticated research question incorporating extensive library research. Paper demonstrates mastery of standard academic documentation styles.		
Style/Sentence Structure	Unacceptable grammar or syntax.	Marginally acceptable sentence structure but still some problems with grammatical errors, syntax and/or punctuation.	Acceptable sentence structure but not as mature or sophisticated in word choice or syntax as #3.	Clear and mature writing style in keeping with the conventions of academic and /or professional discourse.		
Total Score						

Appendix 2: Essay Scores

Scores of 110-120 Essays

Learning Outcome	**110 Average Score**	**120 Average Score**	**Average Degree of Improvement**
A. Critical analysis of academic discourse	2.03	3.29	1.26 (62%)
B. Integrating multiple academic sources	1.06	3.58	2.52 (237%)
C. Academic Research	0.67	3.32	2.65 (395%)
D. Style	3.29	3.9	0.61 (18.5%)

Scores of 130-131 Essays

Learning Outcome	**130 Average Score**	**131 Average Score**	**Average Degree of Improvement**
A. Critical analysis of academic discourse	3.89	3.83	-0.06 (-1.5%)
B. Integrating multiple academic sources	2.44	3.56	1.12 (46%)
C. Academic Research	0.72	3.06	2.34 (325%)
D. Style	3.78	4	0.22 (6 %)

Appendix 3: RC 110/120 Outcomes Individual Scoring

A. Critical Analysis

Student Number	110 Combined Score	120 Combined Score	Improvement
01	5	4	-1
02	0	5	5
03	1	3	2
04	2	4	2
05	6	5	-1
06	0	3	3
07	2	3	1
08	0	5	5
09	5	3	-2
10	6	3	-3
11	4	3	-1
12	1	2	1
13	0	1	1
14	0	2	2
15	1	4	3
16	3	4	1
17	2	2	0
18	0	4	4
19	0	3	3
20	4	4	0
21	0	4	4
22	2	2	0
23	0	3	3
24	2	3	1
25	0	4	4
26	1	2	1
27	5	4	-1
28	4	4	0
29	2	3	1
30	5	3	-2
31	0	3	3

B. Integrating Sources

Student Number	110 Combined Score	120 Combined Score	Improvement
01	2	4	2
02	0	6	6
03	0	2	2
04	0	4	4
05	3	5	2
06	0	2	2
07	1	4	3
08	0	2	2
09	2	4	2
10	2	5	3
11	3	4	1
12	1	4	3
13	0	4	4
14	0	1	1
15	1	4	3
16	1	6	5
17	1	4	3
18	1	4	3
19	0	2	2
20	2	4	2
21	0	4	4
22	1	3	2
23	0	3	3
24	1	3	2
25	0	4	4
26	1	2	1
27	3	3	0
28	3	5	2
29	2	3	1
30	2	4	2
31	0	2	2

C. Academic Research

Student Number	110 Combined Score	120 Combined Score	Improvement
01	0	3	3
02	0	5	5
03	0	2	2
04	0	2	2
05	3	5	2
06	0	2	2
07	2	4	2
08	1	3	2
09	0	4	4
10	0	5	5
11	3	4	1
12	2	3	1
13	0	5	5
14	0	1	1
15	2	3	1
16	1	6	5
17	1	2	1
18	0	5	5
19	0	2	2
20	0	3	3
21	0	4	4
22	0	2	2
23	0	3	3
24	1	3	2
25	0	3	3
26	1	4	3
27	1	4	3
28	1	3	2
29	1	2	1
30	1	3	2
31	0	3	3

D. Style

Student Number	110 Combined Score	120 Combined Score	Improvement
01	3	3	0
02	4	6	2
03	2	3	1
04	4	4	0
05	3	4	1
06	3	2	-1
07	3	4	1
08	4	5	1
09	4	4	0
10	5	5	0
11	4	5	1
12	3	3	0
13	4	4	0
14	4	4	0
15	4	5	1
16	3	6	3
17	3	3	0
18	3	4	1
19	2	2	0
20	4	4	0
21	4	4	0
22	2	2	0
23	4	4	0
24	2	4	2
25	4	4	0
26	4	5	1
27	4	4	0
28	3	5	2
29	1	2	1
30	2	4	2
31	3	3	0

Appendix 3: RC 130/131 Outcomes Individual Scoring

A. Critical Analysis

Student Number	130 Combined Score	131 Combined Score	Improvement
01	5	4	-1
02	6	4	-2
03	6	5	-1
04	5	3	-2
05	6	4	-2
06	3	5	2
07	4	6	2
08	3	3	0
09	4	4	0
10	4	5	1
11	4	3	-1
12	4	4	0
13	1	4	3
14	2	2	0
15	3	3	0
16	3	3	0
17	2	3	1
18	5	4	1

B. Integrating Sources

Student Number	130 Combined Score	131 Combined Score	Improvement
01	2	4	2
02	1	5	4
03	3	5	2
04	2	4	2
05	2	4	2
06	2	2	0
07	3	3	0
08	2	2	0
09	2	2	0
10	3	2	-1
11	2	4	2
12	2	4	2
13	2	4	2
14	3	4	1
15	2	4	2
16	3	3	0
17	3	4	1
18	4	4	0

C. Academic Research

Student Number	130 Combined Score	131 Combined Score	Improvement
01	0	4	4
02	0	5	5
03	0	6	6
04	0	3	3
05	0	4	4
06	0	1	1
07	0	0	0
08	0	2	2
09	1	1	0
10	1	1	0
11	0	3	3
12	0	4	4
13	1	4	3
14	2	3	1
15	2	4	2
16	2	2	0
17	2	4	2
18	2	4	2

D. Style

Student Number	130 Combined Score	131 Combined Score	Improvement
01	4	4	0
02	4	5	1
03	4	4	0
04	4	4	0
05	4	4	0
06	4	5	1
07	5	5	0
08	3	3	0
09	4	4	0
10	4	5	1
11	4	4	0
12	5	3	-2
13	3	3	0
14	2	3	1
15	4	5	1
16	3	4	1
17	4	4	0
18	3	3	0