

Assessment Grant Report

Fall 2011 Assessment Grant: Assessment of English W131

Department/Program: IU South Bend First-Year Writing Program (English Department)

Principal Faculty Involved: The Director and Associate Director of First Year Writing and eleven fulltime and part-time teachers of first-year writing at IU South Bend.

a. What were the results of your assessment project?

In Fall 2011, the First-Year Writing Program conducted the first full-scale assessment of English W131. We wanted to measure the degree to which students who complete this course achieve four crucial learning outcomes:

- thesis development
- accurate and appropriate use of evidence
- analysis and synthesis of sources
- grammatical control and flexibility

We selected these four learning outcomes from the eight English W131 Exit Goals in place since 2004 (see Appendix 1) which represent our program's core educational goals, provide the basis for our curriculum and teacher training, and identify our standards and expectations for students' written work. We focused on these four learning outcomes in particular because they address the expectations for student writing that we consider most crucial and because we believe that these represent goals and expectations for first-year writing that are shared by the campus community. We hoped to use this assessment to help us detect our program strengths and weaknesses in helping students achieve these outcomes in their written work. Since English W131 also fulfills the campus-wide General Education requirement for Fundamental Literacy in Writing, we also hoped that the assessment process would help us better articulate our curriculum goals and student learning outcomes to the campus community.

Our group of thirteen readers (eleven first-year writing faculty along with the Director and Assistant Director of FYW) met for six hours each day on June 25-27 2012 to read the 163 papers randomly selected from sections of W131 taught at IU South Bend in Fall 2011 and Spring 2012. Each paper was read and scored by three different readers, using the assessment rubric we had developed, for a total of 489 reading scores. The readers' scores were recorded by each reader and then consolidated by one volunteer in the group, who participated in the initial calibration session each morning and read for the first hour, then took over the role of adding other readers' scores to a database. Those results were later checked and double-checked against the data recorded by each reader.

The assessment rubric (Appendix 2) measured student learning outcomes in four areas: thesis development; work with quoted evidence; connections between sources; grammatical control and flexibility. Those outcomes were measured on a

scale of 1-4, with 1 defined as a weak or non-existent achievement of the learning outcome and 4 defined as a strong demonstration of the learning outcome.

Charts A and B (below) indicate the results of the readers' scores. Chart A emphasizes the degree to which the student papers demonstrated each of the four learning outcomes on a scale of 1-4, and Chart B indicates the degree to which the papers achieved the combined learning outcomes.

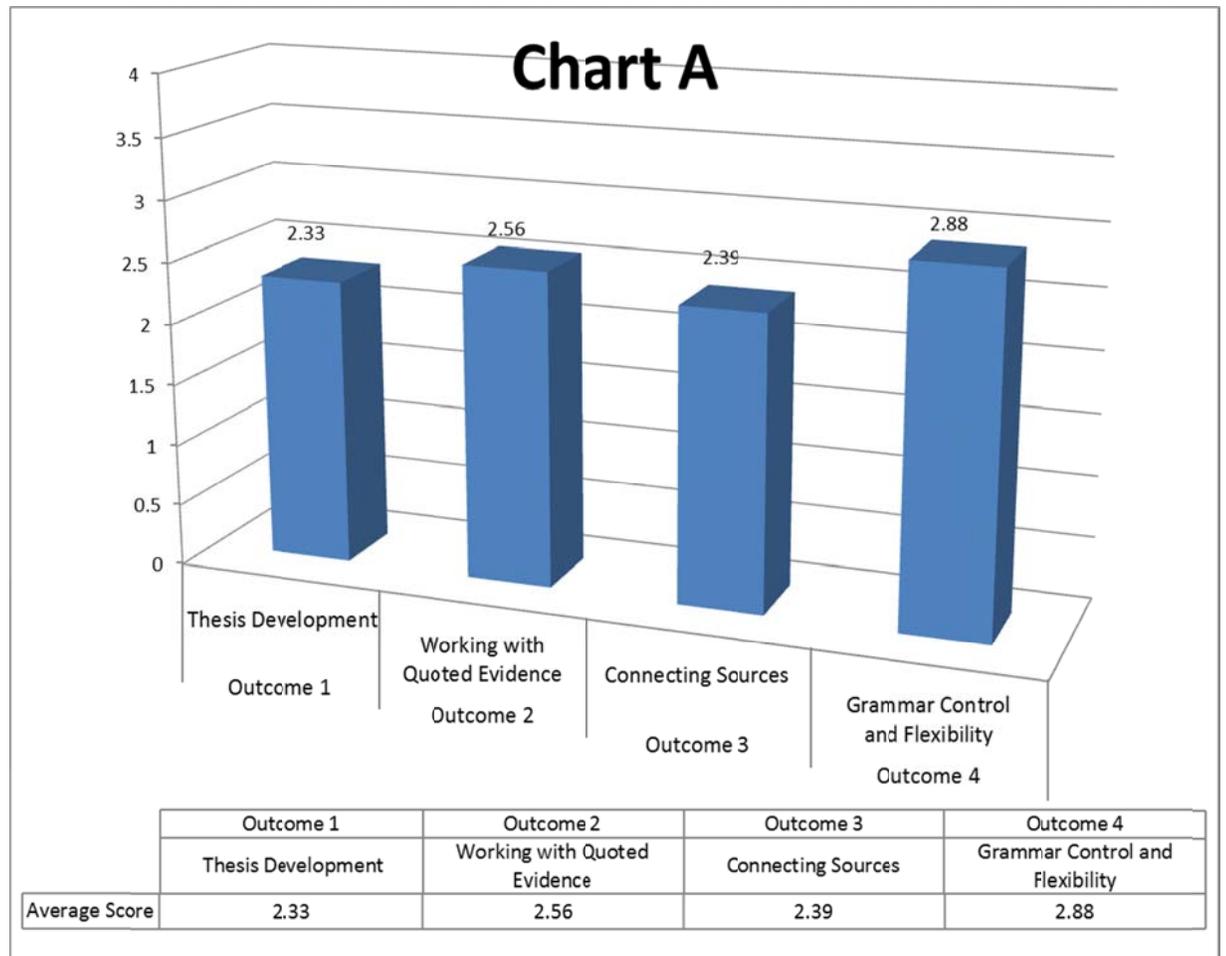
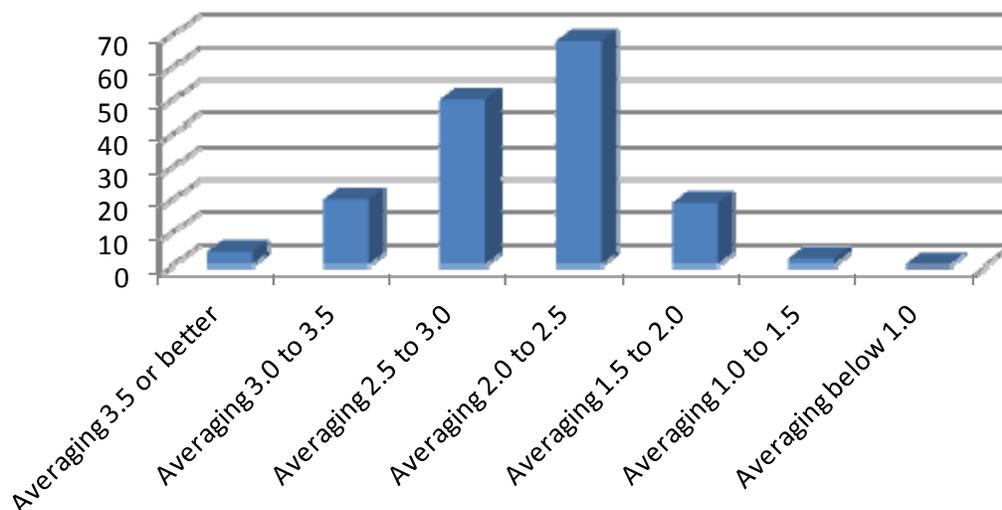


Chart B: Counts of 163 Papers by Overall Average Score



Interpretation:

These quantitative results helped us to identify how well the program is delivering its stated goals. As Chart A indicates, for example, our students have some success in achieving grammatical control and flexibility within the often-unfamiliar rhetorical and syntactical challenges of academic writing. They also demonstrate stronger success rates in using quoted evidence in thoughtful and analytic ways than they do in the more difficult areas of meaningfully synthesizing sources and developing an intellectually dense and sustained thesis throughout an essay. We also noted (from Chart B) that the bulk of our student papers accomplish the four learning outcomes at a level between 2.0 and 3.0 on the scale of 1-4 (where 1 is a non-existent or weak attempt and 4 is a strongly successful demonstration of the learning outcome). These results provide a basis for future curriculum revisions, honing pedagogical best practices, and intensifying teacher training and supervision in certain areas.

Qualitative Results:

While the strength of the program rests in part on the design of the curriculum, it depends even more on the effectiveness of the teaching. The collaborative work of reading, discussion, and reflection had been enormously beneficial for the thirteen first-year writing teachers engaged in the project. In addition to the community rapport and improved lines of communication that developed among the group, this shared enterprise resulted in four distinct benefits for readers that will in turn benefit the writing program and students and campus community it serves.

1. **Enhanced Perspective:** Because the teachers in the group measured and discussed the curriculum goals and student outcomes for English W131 within the larger context of state-wide goals and outcomes, they emerged with a better understanding of how the IU South Bend Writing Program fits into the larger picture of college-level writing in the state. This was an important enhancement of perspective, partly for teachers who had never taught in another writing program, but also for the writing program administrators in making more visible some of the hidden assumptions and pedagogical intentions implicit in program training materials, such as the W131 Exit Goals. This became an opportunity to ask, “What do we truly value in student writing?” and to consider the degree to which those values were clearly represented in our curriculum.
2. **Ongoing Training:** The sustained practice of reading student papers and scoring them on an objective scale was extremely useful as a training mechanism for the teachers involved in the project. Within the context of the classroom, teachers become so invested in their students’ success and so enmeshed in creating a learning environment that will best serve a particular group of students that they rarely have the opportunity to separate the learning outcomes represented in the papers from the needs and achievements of the student writers who produced them. Although the writing program runs calibration workshops throughout the year to address this very issue, teachers may read 1-3 papers in a given calibration workshop. By contrast, some of the readers in our assessment group scored as many as fifty student papers in three days, which they felt directly benefited their ability to assess their own student papers in subsequent semesters.
3. **Beneficial Exchanges:** Because the group of thirteen assessment readers represented a range from new teachers, with only a semester of experience, to veteran teachers, the shared process, including the daily calibrations and discussions, also resulted in mutually beneficial exchanges of teaching practices and pedagogical philosophies and values. It further became an opportunity to involve part-time teachers in program development and to convey to them how valuable their contributions were throughout the entire assessment process, including data-gathering, analysis and interpretation, and dissemination.
4. **Readers’ Reflections:** The process of recording and summarizing readers’ daily reflections and the cumulative lessons learned through our discussions helped us to augment our quantitative findings with the qualitative insights these highly skilled readers were able to provide. These insights included concerns that some assignment prompts (which could only be inferred from the resulting papers) might not be working well to help students achieve the desired learning outcomes; they included concerns that a few teachers might be adequately addressing the program’s curriculum goals; and they targeted

general areas of weaker achievement, especially involving students' efforts to synthesize texts but also involving related issues, such as reading comprehension. It became clear that we need to increase the emphasis on assignment writing in relation to goals both in our initial teacher training and in the ongoing training of new and experienced teachers. We also saw the need to increase our teachers' range of practice-based strategies for helping students with reading comprehension and synthesis of sources—giving teachers not one or two but multiple different methods for helping students achieve these outcomes. We also recognized that while the majority of teachers were clearly doing effective work in articulating curriculum goals to students, a few teachers were apparently not addressing some of those goals and we should increase the degree to which we provide oversight in terms of outcomes in students' written work.

b. How will these results be used to improve your program's assessment of student learning outcomes?

Working with the thirteen assessment readers through daily reflections on the assessment process and follow-up interpretation and analyses of the assessment findings, we developed the following action plan:

- 1. Extended Teacher Training:** Given the resources, we hope to expand our current training to include assigned background readings and homework that demonstrates the degree to which teachers have assimilated the material and can articulate it effectively to students.
- 2. Added Training Workshops:** We hope to focus the roster of training workshops required for all first-year writing teachers so that they address the areas identified through the assessment process. These include a workshop on linking assignment prompts to desired student learning outcomes (possibly co-taught by a UCET specialist in conjunction with a Writing Program teacher); a workshop reviewing numerous strategies for teaching reading comprehension and rereading techniques; and a workshop expanding the range of teachers' strategies for helping students connect and synthesize sources. We also plan to add more specialized training for W131 teachers focusing on the research process, particularly in helping students evaluate and integrate sources effectively.
- 3. Added Oversight for Experienced Teachers:**
We plan to extend the current practice of folder reviews (in which the Director or Assistant Director of First-Year Writing meets with each new teacher to review a full set of student papers in order to evaluate whether the students are achieving the desired learning outcomes) to include a regular rotation of experienced teachers as well. We feel this

will help to increase oversight for teachers who may not be adequately addressing the program's curriculum goals.

4. Continued Work on the W131 Curriculum:

As part of a planned revision of the program's co-written publication, *Understanding the Goals for First-Year Writing: Resources for Successful W130 and W131 Papers* (ISBN: 9780738048543), a handbook used in all first-year writing classrooms, we intend to give some fresh consideration to the W131 Exit Goals and curriculum materials to make sure they fully represent fundamental literacy values and best practices and to ensure that those values and practices are articulated effectively to students.

5. Enhancing the Assessment Process:

In terms of reflecting on and improving the assessment process itself, we would recommend the following changes:

- Simplify the scoring range to a choice of 1-3 (weak, competent, strong) in order to give assessment readers a clearer set of distinctions between potential scores.
- Add a comment box on the scoring sheets used by readers to allow for qualitative data reflections in addition to the numerical score. For example, readers might note papers that would be particularly useful for further program attention and research: papers that model excellent achievement of the curriculum goals and could be used for training and dissemination; papers that pinpoint program weaknesses or indicate a valuable outcome for student writing that is not well articulated by the curriculum goals or addressed by the assessment rubric.
- Collect teachers' assignment prompts in order to test our hypotheses about the kinds of prompts that are most effective in helping to produce the desired student learning outcomes.
- While we would continue to make the paper reading process itself anonymous, we would also consider keying the quantitative results in terms of student outcomes to the particular sections in which the papers were produced. This would allow us a post-assessment opportunity to benefit from the practices used by our strongest teachers and intervene with less effective teachers through increased training and oversight.
- Further, if we are able to garner grant support for a future assessment cycle, we would also be interested in expanding to a more ambitious scale. For instance, we would like to include data on students: whether or not they took English W130 in preparation for W131; number of times they attempted both W130 and W131; placement data including SAT and reading scores; major; semesters completed toward graduation; whether

or not they were attending school fulltime; and other information that might indicate the background contexts and structural supports that increase student learning.

c. Will the work started with this assessment project be continued?

We intend to continue the assessment process on a 3-5 year cycle, depending on the resources available and the scope of subsequent assessment projects. Because of the size of the program, a full-scale annual assessment would be impractical, but we plan to continue to gather data and to explore other avenues for data collection, such as e-portfolios.

How are the results of your assessment project being shared with department faculty, students, IU South Bend faculty and other appropriate groups?

We shared the initial data with the assessment-reading group of thirteen first-year writing faculty and worked together to interpret the results. We then compiled the results into a report that included that interpretation and presented it to the First Year Writing Committee in September 2012. During that meeting, we again asked for feedback on the results and for help in developing an action plan for the changes in program structure, training, and supervision that might result from these findings. We also solicited ideas for further dissemination of these results both among our faculty and to the larger campus community. Based on the Committee's advice, we developed a more detailed version of this report for the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, who oversees the General Education curriculum at IU South Bend and who, we understand, will disseminate the findings to campus administrators and to the Faculty Senate General Education Committee. We also plan to present our findings at the English departmental meeting in October 2012 and to post a copy of the report on the English Department Website, where it will be available to faculty and students campus-wide. Most importantly, we intend to continue working from our findings as we develop the curriculum of English W131, as we train and supervise the teachers of that course, and as we communicate curriculum goals to our students and help them achieve the appropriate learning outcomes.