

## IMPLEMENTING WRITING COURSES AND TESTING STUDENTS FOR MINIMUM COMPETENCIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

**Speakers:** Lana Silverthorne, University of South Alabama  
Marc Matre, University of South Alabama

**Introducer/Recorder:** Gerry Winter, University of Akron, Ohio

Lana Silverthorne opened the session by explaining the development of the Writing Across the Curriculum program at USA, an institution of approximately 10,000 students. The program began in 1979 with the appointment of a twelve-member Committee on Writing. A survey of faculty members by this committee indicated a campus-wide awareness of writing across the curriculum programs; thus, a University Writing Program Advisory Committee was appointed to initiate several changes at USA. The first of these changes was in the basic freshman grammar course (101), which was restructured into a writing workshop, using student papers as the text, with sequenced writing assignments designed to move students from informal, exploratory writing to more formal writing. Students in this course photocopy their papers to share with members of small groups, and they discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Students with more serious writing problems are also referred to the Writing Lab, though faculty members are discouraged from requiring Writing Lab visits.

Students are placed in 101 with an ACT [American College Testing Service] score of twenty-two or lower, which exempts only about 8 percent of USA's freshmen. This course is given four hours of credit, but it is taken pass/fail so that students may repeat it with no penalty to their average. To pass, students must receive a satisfactory rating on a holistically scored exit exam at the end of the quarter; approximately 70 percent pass the first time. Passing enables them to go on to the next required writing

course (102), a more traditional composition course for which students receive not only credit but a grade.

In addition to changing the freshman writing course, the committee developed two pilot programs, one a university writing curriculum and the other a writing placement test for transfer students. For the writing curriculum, each undergraduate department selected one full-time faculty member who was teaching a course required for a major or minor to develop a writing requirement for her or his course. Faculty members who agreed to add this "designated writing credit" (W) to their courses were paid a one-time stipend of \$400 and were guaranteed both reduced teaching loads and reduced student loads. In return, they agreed to attend a week-long workshop and incorporate the ideas of that workshop in their syllabi. Using the idea implemented in the 101 course, workshop participants were guided in preparing sequenced writing assignments for their courses. These assignments encouraged frequent, short writings rather than the more traditional essay test or the one-time term paper. In addition, workshop participants spent time holistically scoring sample student papers to develop their skill in evaluating student writing. Forty faculty members attended the first workshop, and since then, nearly eighty more have participated in the annual workshop. As a result, 138 junior and senior courses carry W credit, with approximately sixty such courses available each quarter. Since the 1983-84 school year, students have been required to take two of these upper level W courses, at least one of which must be in their major or minor.

Marc Matre described the second pilot program, for which he had just completed a computerized study. The survey of faculty members had also identified a "transfer-student problem," that is, faculty members felt that many transfer students were poor writers. Consequently, a placement test was developed for any transfer student with the equivalent of USA's 101 course from another school. This exam is much like the exit exam for the 101 freshman course, since passing this test means the same thing as passing English 101. For this placement test,

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students are given their choice of six to nine topics, such as "my first car," the "opportunity of a lifetime," and "my most memorable person." This placement exam, like the 101 exit exam, is taken pass/fail, but students who fail have to enroll in English 101; they cannot transfer their equivalent class credit. About 23 percent of USA's transfer students fail this exam.

The major difference between this transfer placement test and the 101 exit exam is in the scoring. While the 101 exit exams are graded by the English Department, the scoring of the transfer placement tests is done by the faculty members who are teaching W courses across the curriculum. More than half of the faculty who have attended the writing workshops have participated as raters of these exams. The use of faculty members from other departments reflects a belief that evaluating the load of transfer-student placement tests cannot be absorbed wholly by the English Department. Moreover, this provides a vehicle for increasing the participation of non-English faculty in the writing program and serves to develop coherence between all the departments on campus and the writing standards required at USA. Using non-English faculty raters also allows faculty members teaching W courses to have some impact on who can take their courses.

Raters are given a training session in evaluation before each new placement exam to review the testing materials. The purpose of the test is reiterated during this session, and sample papers are discussed, using a range of papers from those that would clearly pass, to marginal cases, to those that would clearly fail. These sessions serve not only as preparation for new readers but also as review for evaluators who have not rated for a quarter or more. Furthermore, the confidence of the raters is bolstered when they see that they generally agree with their colleagues. To eliminate bias, raters are placed in heterogeneous groups so that no group is all one sex or all from one college. Matre has developed a computer program that assigns groups by controlling these variables. Exams are then assigned to the groups randomly. Faculty evaluators are paid \$50 for rating a packet of twenty to thirty placement exams, which have been photocopied. After receiving the exams, raters have twenty-four hours to score them. Each paper is evaluated by at least two raters, and splits are rated by three or more readers. Because the pass/fail rating seemed too rigid, faculty members elected to use a confidence rating of 1-2-3-4-5 for passing papers, ranging from 1, meaning "pass with no confidence," to 5, meaning "passing with confidence." Papers that receive a split evaluation with the passing mark indicating low confidence may have more than just the third reader to insure the evaluation is as fair as possible to the student.



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Two concerns of this cross-curriculum grading program were whether raters could be consistent and whether they could agree. Therefore, Matre developed another computer program to determine the most reliable and the most valid readers, in an attempt to establish an evaluator core from these readers. This proved to be unrealistic in practice, however, because of the diplomatic problem of dismissing people as poor readers. Matre also wanted to develop these reliability and validity scores to aid in pairing readers so that groups were varied not only by sex and college but also by reliability and validity ratings. For a reliability rating, he had to collect scoring data for the placement exam, which he computerized, comparing (1) the decision of the first rater, (2) the decision of the second rater, (3) how closely they agreed. The most reliable raters, of course, agreed the most often. To determine validity, he used computerized information on GPA's, available through other sections of the University, to compare each student's placement test rating to his GPA for courses taken at USA the semester following the test. Valid evaluators did not pass students who were failing nor fail students who were passing. Matre presented reliability and validity statistics for each of the raters in the winter quarter of 1984 and the fall quarter of 1985; the data indicated that there are not many unreliable or invalid readers. However, those identified invalid are not asked to rate again, though this is still difficult to uphold if someone really wants to be a rater.

Matre concluded by stating that he hopes in the future to draw a random sample of the holistically scored placement tests, have them analytically evaluated, and compare the results to determine the reliability of the holistic evaluation as well. ■