HOW TO ORGANIZE A CROSS-CURRICULAR WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Speakers: Gail Hughes-Wiener, Susan Jensen-Cekalla, Gerald Martin, Mary Thornton-Phillips, Minnesota Community College System

Introducer/Recorder: Julienna Prineas, University of Minnesota

The speakers began the session by describing how, with the support of a Bush Foundation Grant, the Minnesota Community College System (comprised of 18 two-year college scattered across the state) has been engaged in a three-year project to assess the effects of their Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program on faculty and students, especially on student learning. The four speakers described their separate but overlapping roles in the project, with a view to communicating the complexity of implementing this type of project. Mary Thornton-Phillips' role has been to design and establish the broad structure of the project. Susan Jensen-Cekalla, as the WAC Program Coordinator, has served as a bridge between the evaluation project and the faculty out in the college. Gail Hughes-Wiener's role as Evaluation Coordinator is to ensure that all of the components of the evaluation—such as surveys, interviews, essay exams and such—are designed, coordinated, implemented, analyzed and communicated. Gerald Martin, as research analyst, is in charge of processing the data.

Hughes-Wiener pointed out the need to budget for an immense amount of administrative, interpersonal, and program development required prior to any actual data analysis or report writing. Her experience has been that no one, including consultants prominent in the field of program evaluation, anticipated the amount of work and time needed for this preparatory work. The scope of the project demonstrates its complexity: data must be collected on faculty attitudes, student attitudes, and student learning. The project required the careful development of questionnaires and surveys, the effective training of interviewers, and the preparation of holistic scoring terms. In addition, the project leader had to build credibility and trust among program participants and become knowledgeable about all needed information.

Thornton-Phillips commented that their progress has been aided by a clear sense of direction, despite uncertainty as to how to achieve their goals. Allowing for flexibility and change within a general framework has proved necessary and productive. For example, faculty involvement was essential to the success of the project. Faculty had to become trained, knowledgeable participants who understood the research and their role in it. Thus, Thornton-Phillips' first challenge was to assess the needs and interests of faculty in an attempt to generate strong staff commitment and to develop a core faculty able to provide leadership for the program. The task was hindered by the voluntary nature of staff development in the Community College System and by the tendency to cut funds for such development during budget crises. Thornton-Phillips found the catalyst for the change needed in a dedicated Joint Faculty/Administrative Staff Development Committee and in a small group of faculty who had worked together for several years on implementing "Writing Across the Curriculum." Jensen-Cekalla joined the team as program coordinator, leaving Thornton-Phillips free to work on budgeting, staffing, and scheduling aspects. Together, they refined the assessment component and developed a reliable approach to reassure faculty.

In her role as the most direct connector between faculty and the evaluation project, Jensen-Cekalla's foremost concern has been that all participants work together and coordinate their efforts. A cornerstone of the project is a summer workshop, which brings together faculty from all eighteen colleges. Follow-up meetings during the year provide the support and opportunity for exchange of information needed to maintain a united WAC teaching approach, and the grant provides all teachers with funds for a variety of supportive measures such as tutors, materials and supplies for the Learning Centers, and outside and in-house consulting. Jensen-Cekalla has also had to organize the data flow of information and resources from the evaluation out to people in the colleges.

Martin's roles have included data analyst, data processor, in-house statistical research consultant, and resident skeptic. With the project now in its fourth year, the time has arrived to renew the research grant and inform the granting agency of the progress made. Martin noted that a project of this type raises many issues along the way. Its original purpose was to look at student outcomes, such as specific changes in writing proficiency and the learning of subject matter. However, several other desirable outcomes not in the original proposal have become obvious. Hughes-Wiener noted that they have learned, for example, that faculty enthusiasm for WAC can be generated and that inroads into the organizations at both campus and administration levels can be made.

PRESENTING A UNIFIED FRONT IN A UNIVERSITY WRITING AND TESTING PROGRAM

Speakers: Lana Silverthorne, University of South Alabama Patricia Stephens, University of South Alabama

Introducer/Recorder: Gail A. Koch, University of Minnesota

How can we foster institutional consensus about undergraduate writing in a university? Lana Silverthorne and Patricia Stephens answered this question by focusing on university-wide participation and dialogue. They described a multilateral commitment to undergraduate
writing that has grown incrementally over the past seven years at the University of South Alabama. The primary agent of this progress has been the continuous participation of faculty from various disciplines, especially in the construction of an upper-level writing across the curriculum (WAC) program.

The impetus for ongoing development of the upper-level WAC program has been a week-long summer seminar for faculty across the disciplines, including one representative from each of the undergraduate departments. It has been repeated annually since 1981. The seminar work is guided by Director of the University Writing Program and by an outside consultant. The participants write and talk about the purpose of writing in their junior and senior courses. They get acquainted with the practice of continuous "writing-to-learn" and with its potential uses in their courses. They put together a proposal for a sequence of "writing-to-learn" assignments to be tried and revised in their own courses over several quarters, and they review each others' WAC proposals. They learn ways of responding to students' efforts to "write-to-learn."

According to Silverthorne, the WAC seminar, first conceived as a means to convert, has by now become a forum for faculty leadership. Participants become the teachers of upper-level content courses designated as writing courses. By now, at least half of the faculty are teaching such courses. (Students are now required to take two such courses, one in their major, and there are now about 70 such courses available each quarter.) WAC-experienced faculty influence the criteria by which a content course can be designated as a writing course. They give precedence to continuous writing in content courses over production of the "one-shot" term paper, and they sanction "discovery" writing which encourages students to "bring their own experiences to bear upon subject matter."

Silverthorne noted that holistic assessment of essays composed by transfer students who have had Freshman English elsewhere has provided a second opportunity for building consensus at the University of South Alabama. Piloted in 1983, the test has recently become a requirement. The test prompt mirrors the emphasis on personal writing in the University's first quarter of lower-level composition and on the exit test given at the end of this first quarter of writing. Students are given a choice of three prompts. They have two hours to write with dictionaries and handbooks. Students are informed of the general criteria by which their essays will be judged. Each paper gets three readings, and the evaluation determines whether or not a tested transfer student starts in the first of the University's writing courses. Since 1983, about 75 percent of the students have passed the test. The transfer test essays are assessed by cadre of faculty readers from various disciplines who teach the upper-level content courses designated as writing courses. Their decision is to pass or fail an essay. If an essay arouses irresolvable ambiguity in one reader, it is passed on to two additional readers for the pass/fail decision.

Records on this assessment process bear out the claim of active university-wide participation of faculty. Between the fall of 1986, fifty-six faculty have served as readers, about 71% of them from the professional ranks. Their distribution by department or discipline shows variety: 7% Business; 34% English; 9% Humanities and the Arts; 18% Medical Sciences and Nursing; 14% Natural Sciences and Engineering; 18% Social Sciences and Education. The records also show high inter-reader agreement. Figures over twelve quarters between the fall of 1983 and the fall of 1987 show the average rate of agreement to be 87.2% in the first year. The local reading was tested against the judgment of external readers. With the help of the NTNW, a study was conducted to compare the assessments of five local readers to that of three readers at CUNY. The rate of agreement between he two groups overall was nearly 80%.

Patricia Stephens took up the matter of the reasons for the high degree of consensus in this assessment process. She cited the quality of the WAC seminars, the credibility of the program director, and administrative support and incentives. Faculty who are developing a new upper-level writing-designated content course are released from teaching one course, and the enrollment in their writing-designated content course is reduced to 25. A participant in the week-long WAC seminar is paid $400; a reader for the transfer test essay who, on average, judges 35-40 papers, receives an honorarium of $50. Stephens stressed the importance of the faculty's common concern for students' development as effective writers, underscoring Silverthorne's contention that drawing upon faculty from various disciplines creates a university-wide sense of responsibility for the quality of students' writing and fosters a continuing university-wide dialogue about writing standards.

The continuing dialogue is crucial. Stephens described "calibration sessions". In these sessions, readers consider their common purpose of helping students to improve their writing and discuss the general criteria or qualities by which they decide to pass or fail a test essay in relation to this common goal. There are four qualities, a number kept small on purpose, to head off a "penchant'read for everything we know in our various disciplines." The naming of the criteria, too, is kept simple and true to the holistic assessment principle of reading for general impression: Invention (Has the writer of the essay been thoughtful, reflective, candid?) Arrangement (Has the writer achieved wholeness, made a piece of it?) Development (Has the writer recognized and fleshed out the point of the essay, giving it credibility and validity?) Style (Does the essay have clarity, give evidence of the writer's own voice, the writer's own crafting, and editing?).

The dialogue amongst faculty continues through instructional use of carefully kept records. Results of inter-reader reliability and validity studies are shared with readers to help them evaluate their own reading performance in relation to that of the others. Readers are
given detailed information about the results of their own
decisions, a statistical summary of each reading session,
and a cumulative summary of all reading sessions. In
addition, the readers are rated and their ranking reported to
them. They are rated on three bases: experience,
reliability, and validity (or the fit between their judgments
and other information about students such as GPAs and
ACF scores). In short, readers have regular, informed
opportunities to reflect upon the relative fit of their
judgment with the consensus.

One last piece of information about the consensus
reported by Silverthorne and Stephens is that the
membership of the transfer-test reading group is stable,
the chief movement being the addition each year of two
new members from the summer WAC seminar. Once
having assumed the role, very few have ever repudiated it.
Stephens pointed out that it is in the faculty's interest to
be involved: reading the test essays serves as a useful
means by which faculty who teach writing-designated
junior and senior courses can gauge students' readiness to
deal with the "writing-to-learn" orientation of their
courses.

EVALUATING A LITERACY ACROSS THE
CURRICULUM PROGRAM: DESIGNING AN
APPROPRIATE INSTRUMENT

Speaker: Linda Shohet, Dawson College,
Montreal
Introducer/Recorder: L. Lee Forsberg, University of
Minnesota

Linda Sholet, director of the Literacy Across the
Curriculum Center at Dawson College, has taught
Canadian literature and writing at Dawson since 1973.
She began developing the Literacy Across the Curriculum
program in 1984; the Center now provides instructional
and consultation services to English high schools and
colleges throughout the province. She began the session
by reviewing the language-related political issues in
Quebec, and then she sketched the development of the
center and discussed the evaluation of the program
scheduled this spring at Dawson.

Quebec is a unilingual province in a bilingual
country. French (first language) speakers comprise 24.6
percent of the population of Canada and 83.5 percent
of the population in Quebec. English (first language)
speakers comprise 68.2 percent of the population in
Canada and 12.7 percent of the population in Quebec.
French speakers see the maintenance of their language
politically, as the survival of their culture. Consequently,
language awareness is high.

Dawson College is a two-year, English language
community college; all students going on for a University
degree must first complete community college. The
Literacy Across the Curriculum program was initiated by
the faculty development committee, not the English
Department, and its administration remains in the faculty
development office. Keeping it out of the English
department gives the program a broader base of support
and institutional commitment, Sholet said. The program,
originally intended as internal, soon started receiving
requests from English-language high schools and other
colleges, asking for ideas and resources. As the program
expanded to meet those needs, costs rose. The only source
of additional funding was the government, which required
evidence that the program was relevant to the entire
community, including French-language schools and
colleges. The Dawson College administration had ordered
an evaluation of the program to show its value to its own
faculty before supporting expansion.

The bureaucratic demand, Sholet said, is to ask how
much student literacy has increased as a result of a
program; her response consisted of showing how faculty
have responded and how classroom activities have
changed. She also commented that the outcomes of a
literacy across the curriculum program are not limited to
reading and writing instruction. At Dawson, faculty
members began attending more faculty development
seminars, interacting across departments, and volunteering
to develop classroom projects (when previously, they had
been embarrassed to be seen at a writing workshop).
Faculty publications also increased.

The design of an evaluation instrument began with a
model developed at San Diego State College, which
helped define an evaluation that would be particular to
Dawson. The college also employed an outside
consultant, Sholet noted, which gave the evaluation
additional objectivity. She cautioned against using
generic evaluation instruments; each program develops
with its own goals and philosophy, and must be evaluated
on that basis.

The Dawson evaluation focused on particular
questions about classroom activities before and after
workshop attendance: class time spent writing; time
spent talking about writing; writing assignments; use of
journals; working with drafts; oral communication
assignments; use of library resources. In categories
covering writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills,
the evaluation attempted to determine what changes
instructors had made in their classes, what goals they had
for center programs, and whether participation in center
programs had promoted educational exchange with other
faculty members or increased levels of theoretical
knowledge. One section defines the program's objectives
and asks faculty to evaluate objectives as appropriate and
applicable; this type of inquiry not only helps refine
program goals for future planning, but reinforces
awareness of program objectives among faculty members
who respond, Sholet said.

The center ran a pilot study, distributing evaluation
forms to 150 randomly selected faculty members, chosen
from those who had attended workshops. About 100
responses were returned; some questions were refined. The