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EVALUATING A BASIC WRITING PROGRAM

ABSTRACT: *The evaluation of a basic writing program can be beneficial in demonstrating the effectiveness of the program and useful in opening up a dialogue among the instructors in the program. This article describes an evaluation program that combines a variety of writing assessments – including pre-post impromptu essays, a multiple-choice editing test, and a portfolio assessment – with student and instructor questionnaires and with indirect measures to provide a comprehensive examination of a basic writing program.*

Many writing instructors view writing assessment with ambivalence. We do not believe that impromptu writing exams can measure students' progress, and we react with similar unease when portfolios are used for external assessment rather than for internal classroom instruction. When administrators mandate assessment plans at our colleges, we often feel "helpless and angry" (Haswell and Wyche-Smith, 220).

However, while we dislike assessment, we fear that it is linked to continued funding for our programs, despite the fact that program evaluations are rarely proposed as a potential means of increasing funding for basic writing programs. Mary Jo Berger has stressed the need for basic writing teachers to publicize what we do and to engage in more "talk," so that others can gain a better understanding of basic writers. Ann Berthoff answered her own question of "What Works? How Do We Know?" by stressing the importance of a lively response on the part of students whose imagination is engaged with their readings and their interpretation. Such engagement is, without question, essential, as is publicizing our work. But more important than public-

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ity, more important that the engagement of the imagination, is writing assessment. Writing assessment can ensure the success of our writing programs by indicating their effectiveness. Karen Greenberg has appropriately cautioned that "the resistance of basic writing teachers to designing and implementing effective assessment procedures and instruments creates a vacuum for university administrators or state legislators to fill" (65). In addition to providing evidence for greater financial support, writing assessment that is used for program evaluation can also indicate what has been successful, what has not, and where further change is necessary. For basic writing teachers, program evaluation opens up a dialogue and provides an opportunity for self-reflection.

Background of the Program

When a former colleague and I founded our basic writing program nearly two decades ago, we were advised to incorporate both direct and indirect writing assessment measures into an overall writing program evaluation in order to determine the effectiveness of our program. Hence, we developed an annual program evaluation that includes questionnaires from students and instructors, students' scores on the external, state-mandated College Level Academic Skills Test [CLAST], students' writing portfolio scores, and their improvement as measured on two pre-post writing assessments (an editing test and a holistically scored writing sample). Together, these instruments have provided a comprehensive evaluation that encompasses both products and processes, students' and instructors' attitudes, and the direct and indirect effects of instruction. Through these means, we have overcome some of the limitations of most evaluations of college writing programs (see Witte and Faigley for an analysis of these limitations).

Our annual evaluations, together with the fact that our "specially admitted "students graduate at a rate quite comparable to that of regularly admitted students, have helped us to obtain the necessary funding for our program from the provost even during severe financial retrenchments. But even more important than the external ramifications of the evaluation are their internal implications: the discussions, reflective teaching strategies, curriculum changes, and program-wide commitment they have encouraged in the participants.

Background of the Students and the Instructional Program

The developmental writing program, one of several services of the Reading and Writing Center, was initiated as a means of helping those students who have been specially admitted to the university under affirmative action. Begun in the late 1970's, this program includes a developmental reading and writing program, a math program, and tutorial and support services. Each year it has recruited approximately

275 students who have been identified as potentially successful college students despite having re-centered SAT scores below the 1010 minimum required for our competitive state university (where admissions scores for the cohort group typically average 1230). Approximately half the students are African-Americans, nearly half are Hispanic, and a few are Asian-American. For some, English is a second language. The goals of the writing program are (1) to enable students to improve their writing skills so that they can be successful in their college courses and (2) to enable students to pass the essay and English Language Skills sub-tests of the state-mandated CLAST. The primary goal is the *retention* of high-risk students, retention which depends largely on the improvement of their basic literacy skills.

The Instructional Program

The developmental writing program consists of small writing classes, capped at 12 students . The instructors, all of whom are highly experienced teachers, share a similar curriculum and assign letter grades. Instructors include both adjuncts with terminal degrees and graduate students pursuing their doctorates either in English or in related fields. A graduate manual on teaching in the developmental program is provided new instructors; in addition, all are observed and evaluated during the fall term. Ongoing staff training occurs at biweekly meetings when instructors share views on the curriculum, teaching strategies, and ways to handle individual student problems.

The program includes a preparatory-level course and a developmental course that span two terms. The preparatory course is for students whose grammar and sentence structure are so weak that written communication is severely impeded. The summer course is non-credit, but university credit is given for the autumn class. The course is taught as a workshop: Students write and revise numerous paragraphs based on personal experience and on selected readings, and work on grammar, usage, mechanics, and sentence structure.

The developmental writing course emphasizes thesis statement and essay development, and organization. This course meets for two periods a week during both terms for one credit each term. The curriculum for the course is based on the cognitive process work of Flower and Hayes and the social construction work of Bruffee. The writing assignments are expository and argumentative and are based on multicultural readings, field observations, interviews and personal experiences; collaborative work with peer editing is encouraged. Students practice prewriting, drafting, and revising strategies after conferencing with each other and with the instructor. During the fall term, students prepare a working portfolio from which they derive the "showcase" portfolio that determines their composition grade. Because the

preparatory and the developmental levels both emphasize the frequent writing of short compositions, the two levels of the developmental program are treated *as a single entity* for the purpose of program evaluation; no differentiation was made between the two levels.

The Writing Assessments

In addition to questionnaires, the writing program evaluation includes three writing assessments—a pre-post essay, a pre-post multiple-choice test, and externally scored portfolios. The pre-essay and the pre-multiple choice test are also used for placement purposes to determine whether students need to take the developmental course. At the end of the autumn, students' performance on the post-tests is compared to their performance on the pre-tests. This serves as one of the means by which the overall writing program is subsequently evaluated. Students clearly have some stakes in each of the writing assessments, although these are not high stakes .

The multiple-choice "Test of Writing Choices," developed by our Center, consists of 40 thematically linked questions that form a five-paragraph essay on the informal ways people continue their education beyond graduation. In much the same way students learn to edit and revise their own writings, students choose the best thesis sentence for the proposed introduction, alter material in body paragraphs, identify an appropriate conclusion, and edit two sample paragraphs for sentence structure, word choice, grammar, and mechanics. Not only has students' performance on the multiple-choice test proved to be a good indicator of their probable performance on the English Language Skills sub-test of the CLAST, but the test has also been administered to high school senior English classes and to college classes as part of a validation process. Although multiple-choice tests are viewed unfavorably today as an assessment tool, our test serves several valuable functions. It can be more quickly scored than any of our other tests, and the computerized "Summary of Errors" provides a diagnostic breakdown of students' recognition of rhetorical elements and selected grammatical principles. To those who suggest alternatives, such as scoring the initial essays analytically or using portfolios as a placement measure, the answer is always one of time constraints. Many students do not commit themselves to attending the university until shortly before the summer classes start. Thus, the multiple-choice test provides an initial measure of diagnostic feedback. Students' performance on the same test six months later becomes one means to gauge any change.

Students also write a 50-minute essay during the pre-testing session, and they take a comparable post-essay six months later. Each time, two different expository topics are given; the topics follow the

paradigm developed by Hoetker and Brossell for the state-mandated college-level writing course. Although the timed essay appears antithetical to the writing process, it enhances the accuracy of our placement approach. It requires students to think about the topic, generate ideas, write, and do limited proofreading. Used in combination with the editing test, the essay gives an early sense of where students are most likely to succeed in their college writing courses. If a student is misplaced through testing results, then that student can, by teacher recommendation, be placed in a different course during the first week of class.

The value of the essay test is limited not only by the time constraints that prevent revision but also by students' lack of access to resources. Garth Boomer, for example, has attacked such essay tests for the flawed, "stimulus-response model" of writing instruction they convey in their disregard for students' ownership of the task. Edward White also has acknowledged that writing under test conditions "represents a severely limited kind of reality" (1993, 91). Nevertheless, the timed essay provides a control factor of comparability for seeing how well students are able to write without assistance. This question is not incidental for our purposes inasmuch as these students also need to write a timed essay for the CLAST just a few terms into their college careers.

Holistic scoring is used to evaluate the timed essays and the portfolios as well. Not only is it more efficient than analytic scoring, but its theoretical principles reflect the philosophy of our writing program: Thus, the basic writers focus on composing short essays, and their study of grammar and mechanics is a corollary of a larger emphasis on writing as a means of communication and self-discovery. The raters have all had extensive scoring and teaching experience; one or two teach within the developmental program itself. Prior to the scoring, a training session is held with rangefinders and sample essays. The anonymity of the students is preserved, and each score is covered. Although holistic scoring has been criticized for its arbitrariness of standards (Charney, 1984; Elbow, 1991; Belanoff, 1991), Brian Huot found that "there is no evidence to conclude that holistic scoring practices impede the ability of raters to read and assess the quality of student writing" (227). And in her study of holistic scorers' reader logs and taped protocols, Willa Wolcott found additional evidence to support Huot's conclusion and Ed White's analysis of the "interpretive communities" that arise in a holistic scoring (1985). That communities of scorers can achieve consensus about standards was shown in the 1994 scoring of our developmental program in which non-adjacent scores or "splits" between two readers occurred less than 2% of the time; an alpha showed the interrater reliability to be .75 on a 4-point scale. Thus, despite its inherent limitations, the impromptu essay provides a valuable glimpse

into student's writing ability that helps not only for initial placement but also for program evaluation purposes.

Portfolios comprise the third writing assessment used for the program evaluation, although unlike the other two, they do not double as a placement tool. Rather, the writing portfolios students create in the autumn are evaluated by their instructors for the final composition course grade. A sample of these portfolios is then group-scored by all the program instructors to serve as part of the overall evaluation. Such portfolio assessment has proved effective in overcoming the limitations of the timed essays used in the direct writing assessment, for the portfolios reflect students' participation in all stages of the writing process and their painstaking efforts to improve through multiple revisions.

The portfolios typically contain six pieces of writing—four revisions of papers written outside class, one impromptu writing, and a reflective letter in which students review their progress as writers. Although students choose which selections they want for their "showcase" portfolios, they must complete every assignment as part of their ongoing "working" portfolio. Such a requirement may, as Irwin Weiser has suggested, make basic writers realize the extent to which their frequent writings can help them to improve (91). Moreover, during the preceding year we learned that without such a condition, some students would simply opt not to do an assignment at all, thereby negating altogether the value of having choice in the entries they wished to include in their portfolios. Notwithstanding the general requirements, each portfolio is distinctive. For example, papers written last year in response to a major inquiry paper, which required students to "go into the field" and, in a setting of their own choosing, observe the various ways that people responded, ranged tremendously in terms both of subject matter and of approaches taken. At the beginning of the semester, students are given copies of the criteria by which their portfolios will be scored, and they are also given reflective guides and asked to reflect upon their writing progress midway through the term. This guided exercise serves to provide the practice in self-reflection that such portfolio advocates as Roberta Camp and Kathryn Howard (1990) have deemed essential for students to improve their evaluative skills. The "showcase" portfolio includes a reflective letter.

At the end of the term a random sample of portfolios is generally collected from each classroom, and after instructors have met for a brief training and discussion period, the sample is holistically scored by the group as part of the program evaluation. During the scoring conducted for the 1994 evaluation, instructors occasionally exchanged information and anecdotes about their students, recounting how hard one student had worked, how much progress another had shown, or how difficult a particular assignment had been for someone. In this respect,

the informality of the portfolio scoring allowed readers, when appropriate or necessary, to construct a fuller context for certain portfolios and, consequently, a more complete portrait of those student writers.

Significantly, such discussions at the portfolio scoring also revealed where likely changes needed to be made in the curriculum. For example, instructors found that virtually all the students demonstrated difficulty both in writing summaries and in responding to essays. This common experience underscored the need for providing additional work in writing about readings. Similarly, instructors also determined from the scoring that the problems their own students had encountered in conducting their field observations for the inquiry project were typical of the group as a whole. Thus, everyone acknowledged that this assignment needed to be given later in the second semester. More than the other assessment forms, then, the portfolio assessment has been directly linked to the curriculum.

Portfolios have enhanced both the instructional program and the evaluation itself, but they have created new problems. Because portfolios take much longer to score than the timed essays of the direct writing assessment, only 24 portfolios randomly selected from the 54 portfolios scored once received a second, blind scoring in the 1994 evaluation; because of the time involved, the training procedures were also restricted to one portfolio. More training would surely have been preferable and might have resulted in closer agreement among the readers. That is, even though 24 portfolios (54%) received identical scores, 5 portfolios (or 21% of the portfolios scored twice) received scores 2 points apart, denoting "splits." Disagreement in the assigning of scores to portfolios is inevitable and differences among the interpretive community of readers should be valued. Peter Elbow has commented, in fact, that "given the tension between validity and reliability—the tradeoff between getting good pictures of what we are trying to test and good agreement among interpreters of those pictures—it makes most sense to put our chips on validity and allow reliability to suffer" (1991, xiii).

Hamp-Lyons and Condon have also emphasized the complexity of portfolio scoring with its "multiple texts. . . .that force readers to consider one text in the light of another, to weigh one against the other, and to make a decision that, while representing a judgment about the whole portfolio, is grounded in the weighing of the parts, rather than in a dominant impression of the whole" (180). Similarly, Sommers, Black, Daiker, and Stygall have stressed the importance of scorers' reading a portfolio completely to avoid being influenced by the "roller coaster" effect that comes from uneven pieces in a portfolio or by the "glow" effect left by a particularly strong piece (19). And the importance of context has been acknowledged in Despain and Hilgers' observation that "teacher-readers find assessment problematic when they

do not know the contexts of individual essays' production" (27). Such concern was readily apparent when two of our raters commented on the difficulty of evaluating the entries with their unfamiliar contexts in the pre-developmental writers' portfolios.

In addition to illustrating its complexity, the portfolio scoring revealed another potential source of difficulty—that of authenticating authorship of papers. As Belanoff has suggested, the amount of help a student receives in preparing a portfolio is not always an easy issue to resolve, especially in a writing workshop context in which collaboration is valued (1991, 31). Nor is the extent or the meaning of collaboration always clear. At our portfolio grading we discovered by chance that two students had submitted the same out-of-class entry with slightly different drafts. As a similar instance occurred the previous year, the problem underscored the potential difficulty of authenticating authorship especially when portfolios are used as an assessment tool. The issue of authorship, which the timed essay circumvents, remains somewhat problematic in portfolio assessment. Thus, we have found what research has suggested—namely, that each type of writing assessment contains its own strengths and limitations. Used together for a program evaluation, the different assessments provide a comprehensive portrait of each student's writing and reveal where the program has succeeded and where improvements need to be made.

Evaluation of the 1994 Program

The evaluation can be illustrated with the fairly typical results of the 1994 program. When the pre-post results of the 161 students who took all four tests—pre-post essays and pre-post multiple choice tests—are compared, the results show a statistically significant increase ($p>.0001$). That is, the average raw score on the 40-point multiple-choice test increased from 21.71 to 24.77; the average summer essay score (with two readers scoring on a 4-point scale) increased from 4.6 to 5.11. Several cautionary notes must be sounded before any interpretations of growth are made. The sample of students—161—was smaller than the actual enrollment, since the other students lacked one or more test scores for a variety of reasons. The 4-point scoring scale for the essay--retained in order not to alter placement procedures from previous years—is rather broad and does not allow for fine discriminations to be made. Further, as with all pre-post writing designs, limitations are inherent. Witte and Faigley have argued, for example, that improvement in writing development may occur slowly, may not appear in the written *product*, and may include multiple variables not considered in the evaluation (36).

The portfolios were scored on a scale of 6 points to enable finer discriminations to be drawn. For the sample of 54 portfolios randomly

chosen to receive one scoring, 36 received upper-half scores. Twenty were given a score of 4, reflecting overall work that was "usually solid in quality,"; 10 were assigned a score of 5, work "generally high in quality"; and 6 were rated a 6, indicating work "consistently high in quality." Of the 18 portfolios receiving lower-half scores, 17 received scores of 3, denoting "work that is uneven in quality" and 1 was given a score of 2, denoting "generally weak" work. None received the lowest scores. The portfolios conveyed the value of the emphasis given to revision in the developmental courses.

In addition to test scores, results were also obtained from the two sets of closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires that students answered anonymously. The responses to the summer program were very positive, with 80% of the students responding both that the course had helped them to improve their writing and that they felt better prepared to undertake the next writing course; additionally, most students liked the small size of the classes and appreciated the support of their teachers. Typical of the positive comments was one student's optional note that "I really liked this class and I feel I have learned so much to prepare me for my other clases [sic]." Other comments were—not surprisingly, given the mandatory placement of students in the classes—negative. Typical of this response was one student's comment, "The teacher was good, but I felt I don't need the course despite my test score." And one student wrote in a sadly ironic comment, "The class did not look a many writing problem; especially grammar. Felt very bady [sic] by this class need to go next level. over all I give it a C+."

On the portfolio questionnaires given in the autumn, 74% of the students responded that they liked—either "very much" or "to some extent"—the idea that a single portfolio grade served as their composition grade for their course. One student wrote, "Portfolio procedure is great allowed to feel confident in writings. Put more effort because grade was a composition grade." In particular, an overwhelming 98% liked the element of choice they had in deciding what to include in their portfolios. One student observed, "I would rather have a choice about my grade and feel good about it than having barriers around what we have to do. The choices of having which papers to put in my folder was helpful. Thanks." An equally large number of students believed the emphasis on revision had helped them improve as writers, and 72% found the idea of a reflective letter useful in making them evaluate their own progress as writers.

What bothered *half* the students, however, was the lack of letter grades assigned to individual essays throughout the term—even though instructors provided extensive feedback in a variety of forms, as well as an interim portfolio grade in midterm. Clearly, some basic writers still felt the need for traditional grading as one student even observed, "A single portfolio grade is not good because I couldn't

monitor my progress throughout the semester based only on the teacher's comment." In contrast to the students, the instructors liked the de-emphasis on grades that the portfolios encouraged. Not only did students generally need to read the comments before trying their revisions, but the portfolio approach also reduced the grade inflation that, as Weiser has noted, can sometimes occur with basic writers when instructors seek to reward their students' efforts.

The instructors, too, responded favorably on their optional questionnaires to portfolios, noting that the portfolios encouraged developmental writers to revise their work and compare their "growing competence" to earlier writings. One instructor noted, "Many students wrote more than the required number of drafts in order to perfect their work. I have never (or only very seldom) seen this happen without the portfolio requirement." Although some instructors expressed concern about the logistical issues of managing portfolios, they agreed that handling the multiple drafts was not much more time consuming than grading the individual papers would have been. One instructor noted that some of the end-of-semester crunch was eased by her familiarity with the students' entries. Another commented in a similar vein, "Though a teacher may actually look at more pages of work in portfolios, the familiarity the teacher develops with papers over the multiple revision process increases grading speed. It becomes easier to define exactly what you're looking for—both for yourself and for the student." Questionnaire responses from students and instructors are useful in providing personal perspectives about the program and serving as a springboard for serious staff discussions about probable changes.

External Effects of the Program

Witte and Faigley have called attention to the effects that writing programs always have--effects that may or may not be intended and may or may not be positive (41). In evaluating our program, we consider two external effects: One is our students' performance on the minimum competency test known as CLAST. Because passing this test has—until just recently when major statewide policy changes have occurred—been necessary for college students to graduate, one of our goals has been to help our students gain the necessary skills to pass this exam. That 71% (or 109) of the 151 students who opted to take the CLAST in the autumn of 1994 passed the essay sub-test was, in our view, a good sign; that only 51% of the same 151 passed the multiple-choice language skills portion corroborated the weak grasp of mechanics and grammar that some of our students have.

A second *indirect* effect we consider is the retention of the specially admitted students at the university. Because our second major goal is to help the students gain the skills they need to succeed at the institu-

tion, we view retention as indicative of how well we—together with many other aspects of university life—are succeeding in helping students. (As of late 1994, between 60 and 71% of the students specially admitted in 1992 and 1993 respectively were still at the university, underscoring perhaps the value of the early instructional programs they received.)

Conclusion

Although our evaluation approaches are not distinctive, our use of multiple sources of data is preferable to a single data source. Not only does the evaluation provide comprehensive information, but the information is also obtained without interfering with the ongoing curriculum. The key to our evaluation is *balance*—a balance of quantitative assessment measures with qualitative indicators of students' and instructors' attitudes toward the program. The limitations of the direct writing assessments are balanced by the comprehensive picture of students' work reflected in their portfolios, while the writing products are balanced by the draft evidence of the processes students used in preparing their entries. The scorings themselves reflect balance, with the external, experienced holistic scorers who rate the timed essays being balanced by the internal teacher-scorers who rate the portfolios. Therefore, the balance that derives from the triangulated perspective of the three assessment approaches, together with the questionnaire results and the indirect effects, makes the comprehensive nature of our evaluation—despite the time, effort, scoring expertise, and expense entailed—worthwhile.

Certainly, our evaluation is not without the flaws typical of many pre-post designs; using a control group would, if feasible, strengthen the results. But notwithstanding these limitations, the evaluation remains a critical part of our program. In an era of tight budgets and increased calls for accountability, we can, if necessary, through this comprehensive evaluation justify the worth of our developmental program by pointing to increased assessment scores, to the overall support reflected through the questionnaires, and to the positive results students achieve on indirect measures. Even more important than the benefits of *external* accountability, the results provide us with an *internal* impetus for reflection, as we use student performance and responses in a formative manner to discuss where curriculum changes need to be made. The evaluation helps to make our program a macrocosm of the writing process it entails—dynamic and recursive, as we seek through thoughtful dialogue to evaluate our goals and revise approaches, assignments, and materials to meet the changing needs of our students. Far more than a tool of external or summative accountability, the program evaluation impels us to be accountable to our-

selves, other instructors in the program, and ultimately, the developmental writing students themselves.

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