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Fast and Fruitful: Effective Writing Assessment for Determining the Success of New Initiatives

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MANY WRITING PROGRAM administrators experience a familiar conundrum: heed the cries for fast assessment results or engage in the lengthy and complicated process that meaningful review of student learning seems to entail? Such was my plight in the 2013–2014 academic year when my university deployed a new strategy for supporting incoming developmental writers. Beginning that fall, students whose writing-SAT (SAT-W) scores were between 450 and 500 were enrolled in a course known as Seminar Plus Studio (SPS), an interdisciplinary class that included a weekly supplemental 100-minute studio aimed at delivering targeted writing instruction, practice, and feedback. Instructors for these sections were handpicked based on their extensive experience and reputations for excellence as writing teachers. As director of writing programs, my challenge was to determine if this curricular change effectively helped developmental writers transition into college-level writing. Add to that task the fact that I needed results *quickly*—if we were not successful, we had to come up with an alternate plan, and the registrar needed enough lead time to get information in the catalog by spring.

Fully aware that direct evidence of writing improvement is hard to procure after a single semester, I chose to conduct two concurrent assessment projects utilizing multiple but fairly simple techniques. The

first examined skill development, and the second explored student growth in writing self-efficacy. What follows is a recounting of my intentions and my findings.

First Approach: Traditional Writing Assessment

The first form of assessment followed a traditional model. A total of forty-five students provided samples of the first and last essays submitted during the semester. Thirty were randomly selected from the available population of developmental writers enrolled in the SPS course, and another fifteen served as a kind of control group from the regular seminar sections (i.e., those sections that did not include the supplemental writing studio). Because my primary interest focused on how the developmental writers fared in SPS, the cohort of regular students functioned only as a point of comparison and was not intended to be statistically representative. Within the SPS group, after obtaining students' SAT-W scores, I identified two cohorts of upper-band students (with scores between 480 and 500) and lower-band students (with scores between 450 and 470). This thirty-student sample consisted of 23 percent of the 130 students assigned to the SPS course and, as such, was representative of the overall population of students in the developmental group.

The first and final essays of the semester were assessed following protocols in which student-author identification was

blinded from nine independent raters (IRs) who used a traditional rubric (i.e., evaluating the students' theses; use of support, coherence, correctness, and style) to holistically assign a numeric score, between 1 and 5, for each essay. While these raters were instructors of the freshman seminar course, no one was reading his/her own students' essays. This meant these scorers were already deeply familiar with the assessment tool; however, efforts were still made to ensure interrater reliability using anchor papers at the start of the scoring process and again at the midday break to correct for any scoring drift. Each essay was initially read by two people, and in the case of more than a half-point difference in scores, was read by a third tie-breaker. Unfortunately, results of this initial assessment were somewhat disappointing. As can be seen in Figure 1, improvement in writing performance was extremely modest across all cohorts of students, meaning this assessment approach did not tell me very much about what students gained from the course.

True, I could see that the SPS students (circle-point and triangle-point lines) on average performed at the "C" level on their essays and that it was not quite as strong a performance as that produced by students in the regular sections of the course (square-point line). At best, I could claim our intervention was a success because most students passed the class, but it was a tepid success because overall writing

improvement was very modest. This was not so surprising because for composition literature, it is clear that one semester is really too short a period of time to expect to see significant gains in writing performance (Carroll 2002). Still, I was left with the dilemma of not really understanding what impact, if any, our studio intervention had on developmental writers.

Second Approach: Scoring Writing Self-Efficacy

In an attempt to gain a more complete picture of students' development as writers and to acknowledge that the act of writing involves much more than could be captured in a single demonstration of writing skill, *potential* writing performance was measured by looking at students'

writing self-efficacy beliefs. My reasoning was based on the conclusions summed up by pioneers in this research field:

If writing difficulties result not only from an inability to solve writing problems, but also from one's own decision that one is unable to solve them, then one important step in improving writing would be to strengthen individuals' self-efficacy expectations about their writing ability (McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer 1985, 466).

Many subsequent studies have clearly linked writing self-efficacy beliefs to student achievement (Pajares 2003; Prat-Sala and Redford, 2012; Shell, Murphy, and Bruning 1989). Aware of this, as part of our work in the course in fall 2013, the instructional team established building students' writing self-efficacy as one of our main course objectives. To determine our success, I conducted another assessment project, separate from the skill-focused one described previously. Students enrolled in the SPS sections completed a short in-class writing assignment that asked them to describe their strengths and weaknesses as writers and provide specific examples from their experiences to illustrate those claims. Students did this writing in the first and final weeks of class, as pre- and post-tests. These writing samples were scored by instructors *not* for writing skill but for evidence of writing self-efficacy, using a specially designed rubric (see Appendix, page 14). Elements on this rubric were directly derived from Bandura's (1993) self-efficacy theory. Scorers spent several hours practicing with this rubric. It was revised and retested until inter-rater reliability was achieved. The mean scores from the pre- and post-tests can be observed in Figure 2.

Clearly, the slopes of the lines here are much steeper than the slopes in the IR-score graph (Figure 1), meaning students appear to have made significant gains in writing self-efficacy even while their writing skills lagged behind. Qualitative
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Figure 1. Independent Rater Scores on Essays 1 and 3, Comparing Different Student Cohorts

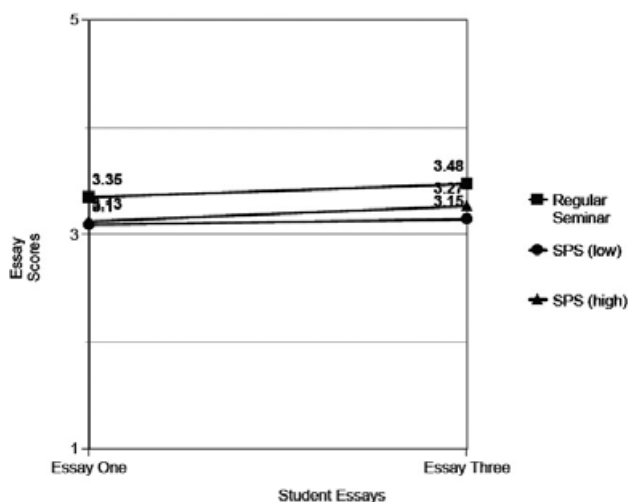
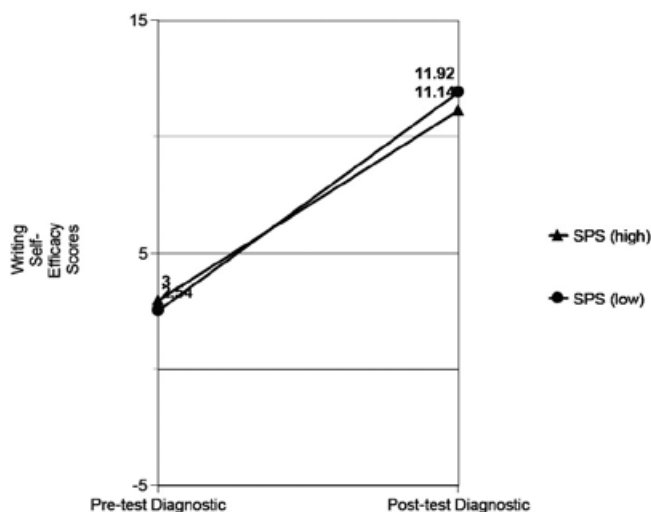


Figure 2. Student Writing Self-Efficacy Mean Scores on Pre- and Post-Diagnostics, Comparing Two Student Cohorts



tion with their Quest course sequence to catalog papers, videos, and speeches that demonstrate learning connected to ethics and community engagement. Implementing these experiences within curriculum provides another opportunity for authentic assessment to support HIP development.

At the AAC&U Institute, one of the concluding thoughts of the “scaling HIPs” track was the need to create faculty oversight of HIPs to be embedded in degree audit so that these experiences can be properly cataloged and studied for their relationship to desired student outcomes at the institutional level. Beyond surveying students or having loose course designations, educators should form committees to review HIPs and hold them to high standards. Authentic assessment embedded in HIPs provides media for faculty who are motivated to enrich these educational opportunities. By using evidence gained through authentic assessment, educators can show that HIPs are serving their intended outcomes and providing a worthwhile experience for students. Authentic assessment has the potential to serve as means to evaluate, teach, and scale HIPs.

Not only can authentic assessment be used to measure student learning to enhance HIPs, but this relationship is reciprocal, as HIPs provide a means to authentically assess student learning. Is there a better environment in which to measure the degree to which a student can apply learning than in an internship or in participating in service learning? This type of learning generates enthusiasm for students to par-

ticipate in HIPs and motivation for faculty to prepare students for these experiences. Because of the stakes authentic assessment instills in HIPs, they move from the periphery of the undergraduate experience to becoming mainstays of academic programs. Authentic assessment is a means to develop HIPs into experiences that epitomizes the purpose of higher education—to prepare students for when they leave. ■

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analysis of the student narratives describing their strengths and weaknesses as writers further deepened my understanding. Initial themes of disengagement, fear of judgment, error conflation, and collapse in the face of adversity transformed into motifs of increased coping skills,

personal agency, and critical distance. In terms of my original question as to whether our new course was successful, the self-efficacy data seem less equivocal: students grew tremendously.

Thus, what this experience has taught us is that assessment results can, indeed,

be obtained after a single semester. What’s more, these results can be especially meaningful when two studies and multiple techniques are employed. Results obtained from the traditional assessment identified a few growth areas in terms of skill development. The writing self-efficacy qualitative results gave us information that could guide our pedagogical practice. A follow-up survey also revealed the teaching strategies our success depended on: cultivating a positive classroom climate, activating

intrinsic student motivation, and forming a sense of cohort among students.

In the end, we discovered that student attitudes about themselves as writers appear to be far more malleable than their actual writing performance levels may be. As attitudes are an important precursor to learning, instructors should employ teaching techniques that engender students' positive beliefs in their writing capabilities to foster the kind of motivation that will ultimately result in improved performance. These outcomes are not only attainable—they are assessable. ■

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Appendix: Seminar "Plus" Studio Writing Self-Efficacy Scoring Rubric				
Evidence of Efficacy: The student is able to identify elements of effective writing AND <i>demonstrates belief in his/her ability to use these elements successfully</i> . While the student identifies writing problems, he/she may offer possible solutions to these problems. The student is aware of writing as a process and is able to prioritize specific future tasks. The student may comment on effective (or new) management of time to effectively fulfill an assignment.				
-1	0	1	2	3
Negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence
Evidence of Mastery Experiences: The student describes having had successful writing experiences at any level or point in the process (i.e., student does not have to have "mastered" all of writing to have had mastery experiences).				
-1	0	1	2	3
Negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence
Evidence of Use of Positive Modeling: The student refers to course readings and/or other writing as aspirational models used when approaching her/his own work. The student might also talk about the utility of peer and/or instructor feedback. The student might refer to his/her own successful previous writing as models as well.				
-1	0	1	2	3
Negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence
Evidence of Reduced Anxiety and/or Increased Positive Affect: The student uses positive or affirming adjectives to describe her/himself as a writer. Student may even express confidence and/or enjoyment of writing. Problems are accurately attributed but seen as specific and manageable (e.g., "I need to work on coming up with strong thesis statements"), as opposed to global and catastrophic (e.g., "I am stupid").				
-1	0	1	2	3
Negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence
Evidence of Empowerment or Positive Social Agency: The student takes responsibility for his/her own writing, as opposed to blaming other factors for poor outcomes. The student may express willingness to "keep trying" and attributes success to improved writing ability rather than luck or external forces. The student may express "ownership" of the writing topics (e.g., "I write to express my ideas"), rather than just writing to please the teacher. The student may describe proactively seeking feedback from readers and/or actively utilizing available writing support systems.				
-1	0	1	2	3
Negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence

Score Pre-Diagnostic _____/15

Score Post-Diagnostic _____/15

Blending Reflection and Benchmarks

(continued from page 2)

Chalk & Wire that assesses benchmarks to be demonstrated in the common assignment. Each section of the assignment is electronically linked to designated competences. All individual scoring rubrics are converted to a 5-point scale when linked to competences, allowing for across-course student and/or cohort comparisons. This allows the school faculty to assess current student performance on all competences.

Field Learning Contract/Evaluation

Students enter field education focused on "practicing" their social work skills. At orientation, students are trained to use their field education critically to gain the experiences needed to develop various competences. When they begin field education, this process supports a different level of collaboration with field instructors.

The field instructor administers the Field Learning Contract and Evaluation tool, with oversight by program staff. This instrument contains all operationalized competences for the BSW and MSW programs with numeric scoring (1–5) for expected benchmarks for each semester of student training. Field instructors and students jointly develop plans for activities to practice and later assess student mastery of all articulated competences, with independent student self-assessment and field instructor assessment of each.

Capstone Portfolio and Process

An e-portfolio comprehensive capstone course assignment facilitates students' assessment of their mastery of the core competences, as well as a developmental assessment of their personal growth and

identity as a professional social worker. Students are required to complete a capstone class in the last semester prior to graduation that requires the completion of an electronic portfolio through a comprehensive, integrative experience addressing learning across all competences throughout social work training. This process includes student analysis of their own portfolio of competence-related assessments/feedback collected throughout the program and stored in the Chalk & Wire portfolio system. Students assemble and analyze their own data and assess their degree of development throughout time and across all competences. The process concludes with the capstone instructor completing a final analysis of each student's mastery of the core competences.

Capstone Survey

While the e-portfolio provides benefits for students, it also provides a signature piece in the program evaluation model. To map the locations of learning across the curriculum, students are asked to complete a series of surveys that report *where* all artifacts (course assignments, field practicum work, and other experiences) occurred. These data are then tabulated and compared to the original curriculum map designed by the faculty. During this comparison, decisions are made regarding assignment value related to competences and the field activities and extracurricular activities that provided the most meaningful learning for students.

Summer Program Evaluation Data Analysis

Each summer, all aggregate data (student self-assessment, common assignments, and field evaluation) gathered from the previous academic year are analyzed, and an Annual Report of Competence

