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## REPORT

Assessment of Principle 1: Written Communication

Reading and Writing

ENG W131

### Purpose

During the Spring and Fall of 2015, the Writing Faculty conducted an assessment of student writing in W131, focused on the first two of the Learning Outcomes for Reading and Writing:

**IU Northwest students will:**

- Read actively and critically, analyzing and evaluating a writer's ideas and assumptions, use of illustrations, examples and evidence, and the effectiveness of the structure and style of challenging written texts.
- Analyze and evaluate the relationship between a writer's central purpose in a text and the rhetorical means—ethical, emotional, and logical—used to advance that purpose.

### Method

Over the course of three 2 hour meetings in the Spring, the six full-time members of the writing faculty and two adjunct faculty gathered to closely examine, rate and describe responses to papers which asked students to critique or perform rhetorical analysis of a single written or visual source. The papers had received a C or better in the course for which they were written.

For the past couple of years, the writing faculty have been engaged in a process called “Dynamic Criteria Mapping,” guided by a book by Bob Broad called *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. Rather than beginning with an abstract and predetermined set of criteria, this process involves a gathering of as many of the full time and part time faculty as possible to read a small number of student texts. Readers then report their responses: what they see working, not working, and features or qualities that they would like to see in texts that are missing. A recorder keeps track of the specific language readers use to describe their responses. The group then discusses and analyzes—maps—the connections between the different descriptors and evaluations, and the group works towards arriving at

groupings and rankings that can be organized as a document naming and describing the qualities and features of student writing that will be used to assess a larger number of texts.

This process can be messy and unpredictable, but we have found that it provides a more concrete clarification of what we want our students to do, a renewed sense of why we want them to do it, and a more realistic and pragmatic understanding of what they can do and how we can help them understand more clearly how to do it.

We arrived at three fundamental questions that we would use in two meetings in the Fall to evaluate and describe 35 papers gathered from seven sections of W131:

1. Does the student grasp a source's project, goal, and purpose, and understand its context and occasion? If so, how well?
2. Does the student understand the source writer's audience? If so, how well?
3. Does the student understand the various types of evidence and how the writer deploys that evidence? If so, how well?

In addition, on the instrument we used to record the ratings of the individual papers in the assessment, participants were asked to provide written observations about the quality and features of the text, its focus, format, length and use of conventions. Even though these things were not the focus of our assessment, our hunch was that a student's overall performance will vary according to the strength and depth of their rhetorical understanding of the text they were analyzing.

However, we also had a sense that students were exhibiting strengths in performing rhetorical analysis in informal writing assignments, in online discussions, and in class discussions that did not also show up in the more formal assignments, and so participants were asked to review and report on the ways in which students might be demonstrating abilities and understanding in those other forms of course work.

## **Findings**

Papers were assigned a score between 1 and 4, 1 being not proficient, 2 being insufficiently proficient, 3 being proficient and 4 being very proficient.

The average score for Question 1: Does the student grasp a source's project, goal, and purpose, and understand its context and occasion? If so, how well?

2.69

The average score for Question 2: Does the student understand the source writer's audience? If so, how well?

2.32

The average score for Question 3: Does the student understand the various types of evidence and how the writer deploys that evidence? If so, how well?

2.42

Insofar as we are assessing rhetorical awareness, these numbers told us little that we didn't already suspect: our students are making solid progress in understanding *what* a source is attempting to do and say, but they are somewhat less confident and accomplished in analyzing the means that writer's use to achieve that end—the *how* and the audiences for whom they write—the *why*.

Discussion of the written comments supplied us with a better understanding of what marks an effective rhetorical analysis and helped us to think about ways in which we could communicate to and guide students in students the procedures, the objectives, and the expectations of reading rhetorically and building an analysis based on that reading.

In particular, there were consistent connections drawn between effective demonstration of rhetorical understanding and strong command of specific evidence, clearly quoted and, often though not always, correctly and precisely cited. Thus a paper was praised for its "Excellent utilization of quotes both in supporting an assertion and unpacking intended meaning." Papers with high ratings were characterized as exhibiting an "Intimate familiarity with sources" and "Excellent engagement with source material" that was worked out in "highly specific" detail at sufficient length. It was unsurprising but nonetheless illuminating to discover and discuss the connections between an "excellent broad rhetorical analysis" and specific citation of evidence. One last representative formulation of what emerged as the positive qualities of a successful rhetorical analysis: "Three-and-a-half engagement with the argument of a single source. Repeatedly quotes source, examining different angles of a source's argument & building upon it logically. Exceptionally successful in its use of evidence."

We also found that students were more consistently successful in reading rhetorically and writing about the issues of audience, evidence, and purpose in some of smaller informal and in-class exercises and assignments, many of which focused on film, TV, and other popular media in addition to short arguments. For instance, prompted by a series of specific questions about the ethical, logical, and emotional appeals of a documentary film's narrating voice, use of "talking heads," statistical graphics and narrative vignettes, students were found to be generally quite proficient at identifying, describing, and assessing the film's rhetoric in blog posts. In another course, students were ask to assess the effectiveness of two arguments on a single topic in journal assignments, and more than two-thirds received high marks on entries that "tended to use highly specific information and even quotations to illustrate their points." The students were found to have begun "the crucial tasks of analysis, and . . . could both assess and articulate specific differences between texts." In a set of assignments focused on articles about a hugely popular hit song, students were found to have been more successful at "examining the assumptions and warrants behind their source's claims and at probing the evidentiary support

for these claims,” a success that was speculatively attributed to students greater familiarity with the sources, “the parity they perceived between themselves and their sources in their level of expertise on the subject,” and the brevity and immediacy of the writing.

### **Planned actions**

Teaching writing can be a discouraging enterprise, and one outcome of the work on assessment that we did was a shared sense that we were asking our students to engage in unfamiliar and difficult ways of thinking and writing. While we are not complacent about our students’ performance we do have a renewed sense of the value of our work and the many ways in which students are progressing and developing reasonably well.

We noticed that there was enough variation in our ratings that we have determined to spend our Spring 2016 monthly meetings in “norming” sessions, grading a handful of essays and discussing our reasoning for assigning grades. This will be clarifying for us and will enable us to express our expectations more concisely and effectively to our students.

The papers that we looked at also reflected diverse approaches to rhetorical analysis, and we have determined to devote future meetings of the writing faculty to exchanging and discussing assignments. We hope to coordinate and align our goals and methods while allowing for a variety of approaches based on our backgrounds and interests. We further expect this practice to help us all to keep fresh and open to new ideas. Our students will benefit from our discussions of what works and what doesn’t work based on our differing perspectives.

We will begin to maintain a database on Canvas for sharing Assignments and handouts. In particular, having re-discovered the key connections between effective analysis and the mastery of quotation and citation, we will collaborate on shared handouts for our students addressing how to use quotation and discussion of specific passages as building blocks for larger scale assignments. Students will do better as a result of regular practice at the component parts of the analytical process.

We will also continue to discuss ways to build on and incorporate students’ success on the smaller less formal assignments in their work on the longer and more formal assignments.