Writing Assessment
at Queens College
2007 - Present

www.writingatqueens.qc.cuny.edu

2007-08
Goals

- Two-semester faculty development seminar with 18 faculty, teaching freshman or writing-intensive introductions to the major in English, Psychology, and Sociology.
- We collected all writing produced these course, plus 8 additional courses taught by non-participants.
- Two goals: **1.)** To learn something about student and faculty perceptions about what strategies help students improve their writing and **2.)** To evaluate student writing to determine if faculty using these techniques enabled their students to demonstrate improvement within a single semester.

2007-08
Method

The rubric used to evaluate student writing emphasized four categories:

1. Development of argument
2. Use of supporting evidence
3. Style, conventions, and mechanics
4. Discipline- and Profession-Specific Techniques

2007-08
Results

- Faculty seminar participants reported learning helpful techniques for teaching writing (mean helpfulness ratings: assignment design (8.73); responding to student writing 8.73); dealing with grammar, correctness, usage, and error (9.3)
- Of 203 surveyed students, the ones enrolled in courses taught by seminar participants reported significantly more attention to writing instruction than those enrolled in sections taught by non-participants—for example 79.5% vs. 59.5% on required drafts and revision; 78.7% vs. 65.8% on having received feedback on early drafts; and 92.6% vs. 71.6% on continuous of particular elements of writing important for success in the course.
- Participant instructors were five times more likely to discuss writing in class, and students in their courses were seven times more likely to report that writing was discussed in class.
- Participant instructors reported that 64.8% of students improved their writing over the course of the semester, while non-participants reported that 47.8% of students improved their writing.
- The evaluation of student writing demonstrated only one area of significant difference between students of participants and non-participants—in the area of "use of supporting evidence."

2007-08
Recommendations

1. More widespread and systematic faculty development for faculty teaching W courses—focusing on assignment design; naming, defining, and teaching particular elements of writing (thesis, evidence, analysis, structure, etc.); effective feedback strategies; low-stakes and in-class writing techniques; scaffolding and sequencing writing assignments; and effective peer review.
2. More research—both qualitative and quantiative—on what techniques help students improve.

Goal

To use the student writing collected in 2007 to measure correlations between quality of student writing and the number of writing-intensive (W) courses taken.

Results

• There is indication of a relationship between the number of W classes taken and the total rating ($r2 = 0.21$). Specifically, areas (2) and (4) were reflected most strongly. Here, the more W classes taken, the better the performance in these two areas. In areas (1) and (3), there were no such strong indications.

• Students who scored well overall (earning a total score of at least 14 out of 20) were more like to have taken (3 or 4 W classes) W classes than (0, 1 or 2 W classes) classes ($r2 = 0.23$).

Recommendations

Overall, the data demonstrate that as students take a greater number of W courses, their ability to utilize effective writing techniques increases. There appears to be a ceiling for this effect, however, with limited improvement occurring after 4 W courses. Future assessment will evaluate the nature of this effect, specifically, how these W courses lead to enhanced writing skills. Furthermore, the effectiveness of W courses will be analyzed within each discipline.

2010-11
Goals

The purpose of this project is to evaluate Writing Intensive courses at Queens College through qualitative research that solicited students' own perspectives, ideas and understandings. Specifically, we sought to determine:

- The degree to which students believe that their Writing Intensive courses meet their needs and help them to become better writers.
- What aspects of Writing Intensive courses students find most and least successful.
- How Writing Intensive courses can be improved to better meet student needs.

2010-11
Methods & Results

We conducted four focus groups. Each had 1-4 students and lasted approximately an hour. We video-recorded all focus groups, with students' permission. Importantly, we ensured that none of the student participants were currently enrolled in classes taught by one of the interviewers. To analyze the material, we transcribed audio recordings of the focus groups and coded them (See Appendices A-C). We then discerned major patterns and arrived at the conclusions and recommendations listed in this report.

We found an extremely high level of agreement on a number of key issues, despite the fact that interviewees came from a wide variety of majors. Somewhat surprisingly, we also found that students spoke very candidly about their experiences. Ultimately, we believe that our findings are relevant specifically to Writing Intensive courses, as well as more generally to writing-based pedagogies at Queens College.

Edited video of student focus groups can be viewed on the Writing at Queens website: http://writingatqueens.qc.cuny.edu/page/13/

2010-11 Recommendations

General

- Maintain or reduce current W course sizes to facilitate instructors' abilities to provide detailed feedback.
- Increase and build on existing opportunities for the training of instructors, perhaps through training courses.
- Consider offsetting the extra time required to teach W courses by allowing one course release for every three or four W courses taught.
- Consider revisiting several of the current components, requirements, and emphases of W courses (see individual sections for details).
- Increase uniformity and quality control of W and English 110 courses, perhaps through closer monitoring of syllabi, annual reauthorizations, and mandatory instructor training (consider assigning Writing Fellows and/or Faculty Partners to some of these tasks).
- Create opportunities for students to publish their best academic papers.

2010-11
Recommendations

Structure & Content of W Courses

- Emphasize the need to use peer review advisedly (see below for details).
- Consider emphasizing auto-review in addition to, or instead of, peer review.
- Work with faculty to ensure that they clearly communicate the goal and purpose of low stakes writing, and its relevance to pedagogy.
- Emphasize the need to use models advisedly (see below for details).

Revision & Feedback

- Enhance opportunities for instructors to learn how to write more effective and efficient feedback.
- Encourage students' understandings of revision as a comprehensive process of reengaging with one's argument.
- Work with students throughout the semester to develop a common vocabulary with which to discuss writing and writing-specific concepts.
- Require that at least one paper assignment include a rewrite in all W classes.
- Maintain the small size of W classes to facilitate instructors' abilities to offer detailed feedback.

2013-15
Study of Student Writing

- Literature review emphasizing national and international research on writing assessment and best practices for teaching writing—including an overview of the history and theory informing such research; studies on effective techniques for feedback, revision, scaffolding and sequencing; and case studies on assessment research projects that may inform the study.
- An overview of the writing assessment projects conducted at Queens College in the last decade.
- An evaluation of student writing collected from upper-level writing intensive courses representing a wide variety of disciplines—with the broad aimof determining how well students close to graduation are meeting the "Goals for Student Writing at Queens College."

The "Goals for Student Writing" statement may be viewed on the Writing at Queens website: http://writingatqueens.qc.cuny.edu/publications/goals/