Fall 2007/Spring 2008 Writing Program Assessment Report

Narrative Submission:
1. What goals or learning objectives/outcomes were assessed in the AY ending June 30?

At the end of 2006/2007, the Learning Skills writing program decided to assess the over-reliance of students on outside sources in their essays and essay exams. The purpose of this focus was to determine how well students incorporate outside sources in their writing and to inform the way that we teach. An evaluation of the written exams of students suggest that they and their instructors are placing too much emphasis on incorporating text in their writing. The result is that independent thinking and personal voice are too often replaced by an over-dependence on the readings that are provided to students on the assigned topic. Consequently, in Fall 2007 a group of instructors representing all three composition courses (LS 15, LS 86, and LS 87) piloted exams where students were not allowed to have the readings. Instead, they were only allowed to bring and refer to a study guide that they created based on a close reading of the texts. Their exams were then evaluated separately to see if the goal of making students develop argumentative essays that reflect more independent thought was achieved. The writing program is using the information from that assessment to “close the loop” and begin taking actions to improve teaching and learning based on the information we gathered from our assessment.

This pilot was part of the on-going effort in the Learning Skills writing program to improve the critical reading skills of students so that they can respond analytically to text in their own writing. Two teachers documented the process through Spring 2008 in preparation for a presentation at the 2008 State CATESOL Conference. They analyzed the problems that students encounter as they attempt to use the texts of others to support their positions in analytical essays: reading the articles superficially or not at all; minimal understanding or misunderstanding of the readings; overreliance on quoted materials; using quotes that weaken rather than strengthen the essay; emphasizing a subordinate part of an argument while ignoring the main point; and the failure to acknowledge sources for the ideas and text of others. They also reviewed the efforts that the writing program and its teachers have made to address these issues in the past including experimenting with prompt types that require students to position themselves with respect to someone else’s argument, activities to engage students’ interest, activities to help students understand the arguments in texts, and activities to help students solidify their own opinions and compare them to the opinions of others.

2. How did you assess these learning outcomes?
Describe the measures you used and the information gathered.

We evaluated the essays from the pilot classes using the established grading rubrics for each class. We also surveyed students in the pilot group to determine their reactions to the new procedures. What we found was not conclusive: students in the pilot groups passed exams at about the same rate as students not in the pilot classes. Student who completed the survey were somewhat frustrated that they could not use the readings during the exams, but they
admitted that they worked harder preparing than they did when they knew they could rely the readings when they wrote their exams. We are therefore continuing to evaluate student writing to assess the challenges that students face in responding analytically to texts.

3. As a result of faculty reflection on these results, are there any program changes anticipated?
   a. If so, what are those changes?

In fall of 2008, the Writing program plans to expand its efforts to develop students’ ability to read analytically and incorporate text more effectively in their own writing. We will revise the learning outcomes for each writing class to reflect the need to improve analytical reading, focusing particularly on the second semester multilingual writing class, LS 87, where we need to differentiate expectations from the two lower level classes. We also plan to continue the pilot program, adjusting the method of preparing for exams without using readings, to determine if these measures reduce the over dependence on outside sources and promote independent thinking. If the pilot appears to be successful, that model of assessment and resulting changes in instruction will be implemented across the entire program.

b. How will you know if these changes achieved the desired results?

The program will gather exemplars of student work over the course of AY 2008-09, beginning with a focus on LS 87. We will gather portfolios that represent superior, adequate, and developing student writing over the course of Fall semester in order to evaluate the degree to which students improve their ability to critically read text and incorporate it in support of their own arguments.

The program will once again collect essays from the pilot program and from those not in the pilot classes; the faculty will conduct a holistic reading of the sample essays using program rubrics and compare results of the two groups. We will once again survey the students in the pilot group about their reactions to the changes. Based on these items, we will make changes in the procedures in preparing for and administering exams.

4. Did your department engage in any other assessment activities such as the development of rubrics, course alignment?

Learning Skills goes to great length of maintain consistency across multiple sections of courses. In the writing program, course coordinators develop uniform diagnostic essay topics, a midterm exam, and a final exam topic. Each topic is based on several expository texts which students read and discuss in advance of the test. At the test, students receive a brief argument on the topic that they have not seen before. They are asked to critically analyze the author’s argument and then explain their own position on the topic.

All essays are graded using departmental rubrics. Grading of the diagnostic essay provides an opportunity to “norm” teachers to the grading criteria which are then applied during the course. Midterms and final exams are group graded. Students receive an assessment from
someone other than their teacher to ensure that the criteria are applied objectively. Students also prepare a portfolio of course work; teachers submit the portfolio of any students whom they feel should pass the course but who failed the final exam. A committee reviews the portfolio and recommends whether or not the student should pass. The group-graded holistic essay exam maintains the consistency of assessment across the program. The grading sessions themselves are opportunities for teachers to reflect as a group on student work. The portfolio review ensures that students who fail the final can receive an alternative assessment so that all students who meet departmental criteria can move on to the next course.

Activities for Closing the Assessment Loop

DISCUSSION AS PART OF HOLISTIC SCORING: Discussion of student reading and writing issues occurs at the two group grading sessions that we hold each semester, one at mid-term and one at final exams.

COLLABORATION AND DISSEMINATION: The program encourages and facilitates collaboration in developing instructional activities to address the observed needs. Teachers submit new materials electronically to the coordinators who then disseminate them to all the teachers in the program. Materials that are widely used are then revised and incorporated into the course packet that is used in place of a textbook in all three courses.

WEEKLY COORDINATOR MEETINGS: Coordinators in the writing program also meet weekly to discuss issues in the program. In these sessions program improvement is an on-going topic. As a consequence we have created and evaluated new topic types, brainstormed new instructional activities, and developed ideas for sharing these activities across the program.

ASSESSMENT RETREAT: In addition, we plan to hold an Assessment Retreat on August 23 in collaboration with the Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP) that is held annually at Sacramento State to improve the teaching of critical reading across the curriculum in high school, community college and the university. We will discuss the challenges that we have observed and invite teachers to present activities that they have developed to address these issues. We will then hold a break-out session for the Learning Skills teachers to reflect on what we have observed and brainstorm ways in which we can modify our instruction to improve student performance in both on-demand and out-of-class writing situations.

5. What assessment activities are planned for the upcoming academic year?

REVISE LEARNING OUTCOMES: The writing program will work with writing instructors to revise the statement of learning outcomes for each writing class. Our goal will be to articulate more clearly the goals for analytical reading and writing in the first level classes (two semesters below freshman composition) in contrast to the second level class (one level below).
**INCREASE DISSEMINATION OF MATERIALS:** The writing program plans to create a site using LOCUS, the library open source resource management system, to further facilitate the sharing of activities and materials as they are developed by teachers and program coordinators.

**COLLECT AND EVALUATE EXEMPLARS:** We plan to gather exemplars of student work over the course of AY 2008-09, beginning with a focus on LS 87. We will gather portfolios that represent superior, adequate, and developing student writing over the course of a semester in order to evaluate the degree to which students improve their ability to critically read text and incorporate it in support of their own arguments. At the point at which the university creates an assessment website, we will be able to post the exemplars along with evaluative statements to document the gains that students make and continued areas of need. We will also continue to evaluate whether students are able to better write about texts in a sit-down exam if they are only allowed to bring notes rather than entire essays with them to the exam.

**OBSTACLES TO CLOSING THE LOOP:** Everyone who teaches writing classes in the Learning Skills Center is a lecturer or teaching associate. Creating opportunities to bring everyone together to reflect on the outcomes of our assessment efforts and to devise ways to improve student performance is challenging because teachers must volunteer their time to participate. In addition, the Learning Skills Center only has access to General Fund money which cannot be used to provide food to faculty. This year by collaborating with RIAP, we are able to present the Assessment Retreat focused on analytical reading and writing and paid for out of stipends that the Chair and Writing Coordinator have previously earned for work outside the department. Needless to say, this is a one-time opportunity. We are maximizing our use of electronic communication to disseminate materials; however, it cannot replace face-to-face communication in order to close the assessment loop. We desperately need on-going funding to ensure that we can continue and expand our assessment efforts.