



English Department

3rd Assessment Cycle 2012-2015

Final Report

General Education Competency
College Communication &
Critical Thinking

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February 18, 2015

Background

EN 101 was assessed for General Education Goal #1 and #2. Goal #1 states “Students will demonstrate college-level communication skills,” and Gen Ed Goal #2 states “Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills.” Six years ago the English department evaluated student performance in this area. Data from the assessment revealed that of the three areas of content, organization, and mechanics, content was consistently the weakest area of student writing. Further assessment revealed that the problem was not gathering research but instead understanding it.

The EN 101 study was followed by an assessment of critical reading in EN 52. That assessment showed that many students who complete EN 52 still have weaknesses in critical reading skills.

Both studies suggest that students could benefit from the addition of critical reading instruction as part of EN 101. Thus, the purpose of the outcomes assessment project was twofold:

- 1) To identify patterns of EN 101 students’ weaknesses in critical reading comprehension.
- 2) To develop a comprehensive strategy to address those weaknesses.

Methodology

Composition and reading faculty created a survey, an assignment, and a rubric to assess student reading. The results of this data was used to identify patterns that need to be addressed. The faculty developed strategies including but not limited to reading instruction and assignments to address reading issues. These strategies were based on the input of all English faculty as well as current composition and reading research.

The proposed changes were evaluated by piloting EN-101 sections and comparing the results to a control group. English faculty used this data to determine the effectiveness of the new teaching strategies and made changes accordingly before rolling this out to all EN-101 sections.

Analysis of Data

Our review of current scholarship on student learning strategies and reading habits revealed that identifying what strategies and habits students employ and measuring the success of those strategies is difficult. Students aren't always aware of what strategies they are using or consider them too unimportant to report. In terms of student learning strategies, one study demonstrated that extrinsic motivation such as assignments that require students to use specific learning strategies did not correlate with a deep and strategic approach to completing the assignment. However, self-efficacy, challenge, and enjoyment all positively correlated with a deep and strategic approach (Prat-Sala 2010). Consequently, instruction should involve providing students with successful experiences using a variety of learning strategies and assessment should involve presenting students with a problem that can be solved by relying on strategies they have used successfully.

The two most prominent methods of assessing student learning strategies and reading habits are think-aloud measures and questionnaires. We determined that the think-aloud method involving a researcher observing a student as s/he reads a text and verbally explains what strategies are being used while reading was unrealistic to deploy on the scale needed. In addition, a recent study by Gonny Schellings shows that the results of task-specific questionnaires were most consistent with student behavior (Schellings 2011). We chose to use the MARSI (Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory) to survey our EN101 students, because it is a task-specific questionnaire where students self-report their activities and habits while reading without requiring them to self-identify these as reading strategies (Mokhtari and Reichard 2002).

Data from these surveys varied from semester to semester, but several patterns were consistent. The most frequently used strategies include having a purpose in mind, thinking about the reading, preview a text, trying to get back on track, using context clues, and visualizing. Another pattern is that activities, which involved moving attention away from the reading were used less often. The Spring 2013 survey reports that 50.2% of students usually or always guessed about the meaning of unknown words or phrases whereas only 37.19% use reference materials such as dictionaries while reading. The Fall 2014 report offers similar results, 47.17% guess about unknown words and phrases and 32.07% use reference materials. In that same Fall 2014 survey, 43.30% of students self-report usually or always underline or circle information while reading, whereas 26.42% of students usually or always take notes.

To assess students' reading and writing skills after completing the course content, EN101 faculty administered a standardized assignment modeled after the skills students would have used to complete the capstone researched argument paper for the course. Students were provided with a scholarly article and were instructed to read the article in preparation for an in-class writing assignment. During the next class period, students were expected to write a paper about the reading which involved summarizing the content of the assigned article, evaluating the article, and offering a response based on the students' own experiences and interests. Assignments were evaluated on three competencies: content, organization, and style / mechanics. These were rated on a scale of 1-5, where 1 fell short of expectations, 3 met expectations, and 5 exceeded expectations.

The results were compiled in a report that provided the average scores of students in each competency and the percentage of students who met or exceeded the assignment expectations.

We identified Content as the competency that measured students' ability to comprehend and use the readings successfully in their writing. Students consistently scored lower in the Content competency than Organization and Style / Mechanics across confirming the need to adapt the English 101 curriculum. The average Content score across all semesters assessed before supplemental reading instruction and assignments were added was 2.63, whereas Organization and Style / Mechanics were 2.80 and 2.91 respectively.

Prior to the Fall 2014 semester, the members of the English OAC collaborated with Developmental Reading faculty to create reading curriculum for use in the English 101 course. This curriculum included instructional methods, classroom activities, and sample assignments, all of which were distributed to the entire English department. While English faculty were not required to use the specific curriculum developed by the committee, all faculty participating in the assessment were required to implement some reading instruction during the Fall 2014 semester prior to the assessment. The results showed an increase across all competencies for Fall 2014 compared to previous semesters. The most important was the 3.08 average score for Content 3.08, which was a 0.45 increase from the average Content score across all semesters without instruction and 0.36 points higher than the previous highest Content average (Spring 2013). These results demonstrate the merits of implementing reading instruction in English 101.

Recommendations

The end of this project coincided with the construction of the EN101 Book Resource Project. Beginning Fall 2015, the department will be switching to a new text, *They Say I Say*, and we've decided to build a web site (a library guide) around the book in support of instructional efforts. We plan on making the results of this project available there, as well as all the reading support documents we provided to instructors in the latter stages of the project.

Additionally, we recommend that the results of the study, as well as reading support materials, be used in summer training workshops for adjuncts (and to full-timers should they desire to attend). In the past, our workshops have been on assignment creation and assessment generally, but this new additional content will allow us to add another important element into our discussions about how the course works. While assignment creation and assessment are indeed important elements in any course, the additional of reading support materials will give us the chance to add that all important third pillar (or the chance to talk about critical thinking/reading earlier in any writing process instructors undertake).

As part of the rethinking of EN101, the department plans to add to its EN101 guideline information about this study, and encourage all faculty who teach the course to engage in a critical reading processes. Done consistently, we believe this process will help students engage with texts in thoughtful and critical ways, and add to the overall quality of essays in the course.