ASSESSMENT NEWS

Department of English, Literature + Reading | Wilbur Wright College

A Robin Hood Tale: Confessions of a Curriculum Poacher

by Bridget Roche, MA | Assistant Professor, English

The following narrative is adapted from Professor Roche's 2014 tenure project.

For several semesters as an adjunct I was teaching English at two colleges, Wilbur Wright College (one of the seven City Colleges of Chicago) and Columbia College Chicago. Wright College is a public community college and Columbia College is a private Arts college. Wright is on the Northwest side of Chicago in a predominantly working class community and is 100% a commuter school. Columbia College is in the

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heart of the "education corridor" in downtown Chicago, and its campus is scattered throughout the South Loop amidst the buildings of at least three other higher learning institutions-DePaul University, Roosevelt University, and Robert Morris University. Columbia's students are a mix of suburban commuters, city commuters, and students from out-of-state, many of whom live in brand new high-rise dormitories with students from all four schools. A sixteen-week semester at Columbia College costs $10,600 for twelve to sixteen credit hours, over $800 per credit hour.

I was paid almost triple the amount as an adjunct at Columbia College than I was at Wright College. A Comp I course at Columbia usually capped out at about fifteen students, where a Comp I course at Wright regularly enrolled twenty-five students but often reached twenty-eight to thirty. Like many of my fellow adjunct instructors at Wright, I was drawn to Wright's mission to provide affordable quality education to the neighborhood population. About half of all American college students today are attending a community college. This massive population deserves quality education and it is my job to prepare them for success at the four-year institution upon transfer. I kept my heart at Wright but it was the basic cost of living that drew me to Columbia. As luck would have it, it turned out my time at Columbia would serve my Wright students well.

Reflecting on the Value of Assessment

This has been a busy semester for assessment in ELR at Wright! First, the data from both the spring and fall 2015 assessment projects has been analyzed. It reveals that, according to the criteria we assess with the Critical Essay Rubric (CER), at the end of English 101 the majority of students are writing well to very well. This is positive news and correlates well with the success data for English 101 during those semesters.
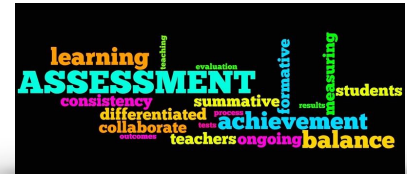
Second, the assessment committee has been developing useful interventions, which will support effective teaching and student learning achievement (see pp. 6 and 8). Professor Roche has updated previously developed English 101 modules, with assignments and readings, so that they align with the CER and support teaching effectiveness. Professors Marsh and Cohen have updated the CER to include plagiarism and ethical researching within the critical thinking criterion. Professors Pell and Uhoch have developed multiple learning-centered rubrics and documents, which focus on formative assessment and encourage differentiated instructional approaches to teaching college composition. Professors Whitehair, Sanders and Bruckert have focused on ways to render the current process more meaningful and, consequently, have recommended the piloting of a diagnostic essay for English 101 in order to measure learning gains achievement at the end of the semester. Taken together, this work seeks to deepen the meaning and quality of the work we do to assure that students are learning well and that effective teaching is supported.

Third and connected to much of the work we plan to do in 2016-2017, this issue of *AN* explores the utility of formative assessment via an adapted version of a position statement from the National Council of Teachers of English (see pp. 3-4). It asserts that formative assessment is a "constantly occurring process" and the "daily embodiment of a instructor's desire to refine practice based on a keener understanding of current levels of student performance, undergirded by the instructor's knowledge of possible paths of student development within the discipline and of pedagogies that support such development." The principles underlying our work reflect this perspective.

Finally, continuing the tradition begun in fall 2015 with articles that privilege instructors' experiences and foreground the power of informal professional development, this issues features two texts by members of our department. Professor Roche's essay questions conventional wisdom about appropriate "products" in first-year composition, while critiquing the academy's penchant for ignoring students' lived experience and the differences between public and private education (pp. 1, 5 and 7). Professor Doherty reflects on the benefits and challenges of using Turnitin's GradeMark feature and its impact of providing meaningful feedback to students on their writing (pp. 2, 5 and 7). Both challenge common assumptions about teaching, i.e., Roche's, the purpose and nature of academic discourse, and Doherty's, negotiating the tension between quality and quantity in student feedback. Thought-provoking and useful, both.

I hope you enjoy this issue. Please let me know -- your feedback has been invaluable.

Yours,
Helen Doss, PhD
Associate Professor, English | Assessment Coordinator, ELR

Image above: https://classroom-assessment-theory-into-practice.wikispaces.com/Assessment+For+%26+Of+Dyslexia+and+Dysgraphia

Student Draft Conferences: Prioritizing Speed and Face Time Over Thoroughness

by Tim Doherty, MA | Assistant Professor, English

> *The speed at which I am able to get feedback to the students and the increased individual contact with students in these conferences outweigh the thoroughness of the feedback that I was providing by using Grademark…*

Much like other members of the department, I am always on the lookout for ways to make grading more efficient, so that students get feedback from me more quickly and so that I am not feeling like the defining feature of my job is an ever-growing mountain of student writing that I have to get through.

Colleagues who have talked to me at some point in the last five years have probably heard me evangelizing about GradeMark, which provides customizable sets of comments that an instructor can drag-and-drop onto a student paper that is submitted to Turnitin. When students mouse over the comment, GradeMark pops out a small window with a full explanation of the comment. Turnitin supplies a set of the classics, like "C/S," which in addition to identifying the comma splice, presents a full explanation of what a comma splice is and suggests the most common fixes for that type of error. It also allows you to write your own grademarks. I wrote one called "Q-Lead," which explains that quotes need to have lead-ins attached and explains how to punctuate them. As an added bonus, if you upload a rubric, you can tag your grademarks to a line in the rubric, so that the student can associate the comment with rubric item it relates to, and GradeMark counts how many marks you tag to each rubric item, giving the student and instructor a quick count of how much feedback is associated with different parts of the rubric.
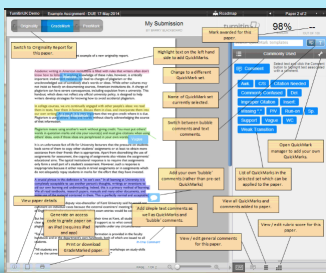

I thought that GradeMark was going to save me a lot of time per essay because I would not need to re-explain any of the comments I used. In addition, I could find trends in the feedback by looking at the number of comments I had tagged the rubric lines. However, by lowering the amount of time that I had to commit to any comment that I made, GradeMark encouraged me to mark everything. Why not? It gives the student thorough feedback without me spending the time it would take to type an explanation of every comment.

Image above: elearn.southampton.ac.uk

Reminder: Updated English 101 Critical Essay Rubric + New Guide Document
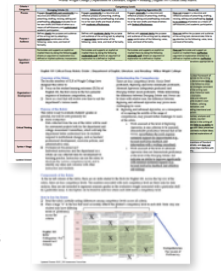
For those teaching English 101 this semester, please remember to use the most updated copy of the English 101 Critical Essay Rubric. It was updated in fall 2015 and is accompanied by a guide document, which provides information on the objectives, purpose, and components of the rubric, as well as key information on differentiating the competency levels and using the rubric effectively.

Printed copies are located in the rear of the ELR department office, L323; digital copies are available from English 101 Cohort Chairs or from the department's assessment coordinator at hdoss@ccc.edu.

"Robin Hood Tale," Roche cont.

> *It is my contention that college students, and community college students especially, are more likely to hold on, to make it through the first year of college, if they are an integral part of their own education. If their voices and experiences and observations are heard, then they will begin to see themselves as a necessary part of the education equation, rather than as infiltrating outsiders whose voices have no value.*

At Columbia I was given a syllabus, course outline, essay prompts and learning unit descriptions, timelines, and themes. The Comp I text at Columbia was a very affordable collection of essays. At Wright, the English department gave each adjunct a composition textbook, which cost the students more than the price of a credit hour. No assignments, timelines, or thematic suggestions of any kind were provided. The textbook was divided into chapters according to essay style, and each chapter included three sample essays and suggestions for writing topics. The chapters also included basic instructional vocabulary. The essays in the textbook were sometimes engaging, such as "A Dark, Skinny Stranger in Cleveland Park" by Stephen Carter, which I continue to use in the Composition courses I teach at Wright. Carter writes a compelling memoir-style essay about civility and his experience of moving into an all-white neighborhood of Washington D.C. with his family as a young African American child. He has a masterful voice that through careful word choice turns a walk through the city into an epic adventure. The textbook also included some effective classroom activities, like storyboarding for the nonfiction narrative. However, the writing topics were often generic and so were many of the sample essays. The essay samples in the "Making a Case" chapter, for instance, included one about prison overcrowding and rehabilitation as well as one about living "green." That the Wright College students were teenage mothers or were working full-time or had returned to school as single mothers at age forty did not matter to the textbook publishers. And what did these students care about living green? Living green is the burden of the middle class. So many of my Wright College students were just trying to make sense of college as first year, and so often as first generation, students who lacked the confidence to believe that they belonged there at all, let alone that anything they thought about the world mattered.

Assessment Geeks, Wanted: *Do you daydream about assignment redesign? After a particularly successful or gnarly class session are you compelled to think about the reason it did or did not work?*

If you answered "yes" to one or both of the above questions, ***ELR Assessment needs you!*** In 2016-2017, the Department of English, Literature & Reading Assessment Committee will work on multiple interventions to support teaching and learning in English 101-102.

Interested? Please send an email to hdoss@ccc.edu with your day/time availability in fall 2016. Part-time faculty are welcome to join!

Formative Assessment That *Truly* Informs Instruction | NCTE Assessment Task Force | National Council of Instructors of English | Urbana, IL

Adapted from the *NCTE Position Statement* of the same title (2013) available here.

Effective instructors are constantly engaged in the process of formative assessment: offering one more bit of explanation from the front of the room when students' heads tilt and brows furrow, asking a student to re-read a paragraph (this time aloud, maybe) when he shrugs at a question in a conference, handing a student her soon-to-be new favorite book based on the dozens of conversations about the kinds of stories she likes and doesn't over the course of the year. These acts of decision making, informed by student response to purposeful or intuitive prompts, are the threads out of which skill, knowledge, and understanding are woven collaboratively by instructors and students.

> Formative assessment is a constantly occurring process, a verb, a series of events in action, not a single tool or a static noun.

Formative assessment can look more structured, too, with instructors beginning a class period with a discussion of a short list of general misunderstandings garnered from a recent quiz, grouping students with varied activities based on the writing they did the class period before, or pairing students to read each other's drafts with a prepared list of questions and prompts. In whatever shape it takes, formative assessment is the lived, daily embodiment of a instructor's desire to refine practice based on a keener understanding of current levels of student performance, undergirded by the instructor's knowledge of possible paths of student development within the discipline and of pedagogies that support such development. At its essence, true formative assessment is assessment that is informing—to instructors, students, and families. Instructor inquiry and knowledge building cycles

The sections that follow offer first a broad discussion of the many and varied purposes of assessment, followed by an explanation of what formative assessment is and is not, highlighting the central importance of instructor decision making in the process of assessment that informs instruction and improves student learning. At the end, readers will find a checklist for decision makers considering the best ways to incorporate formative assessment into the learning cycle of students in their colleges.

Not All Formative Assessment Is Created Equal

Instructors and colleges assess students in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons—from the broad categories of sorting, ranking, and judging to the more nuanced purposes of determining specific levels of student understanding, restructuring curricula to meet student needs, and differentiating instruction among students. In the recent past, educators have made a strong distinction between summative assessment (generally seen as a final evaluative judgment) and formative assessment (generally seen as ongoing assessment to improve teaching and learning). However, in today's assessment environment this distinction may be a false one; in fact, many believe the difference between the two terms has more to do with how the data that is generated from assessments is actually used (Gallagher).

Johnston (1997) offers a useful distinction between these two types of assessment when he suggests that questions or assessments can be interpreted either as genuine requests for information or as assertions of control. Instructor-created classroom assessments designed to inform instruction are much more likely to function as real requests for information that can change instruction and improve learning; "mini-summative" assessments, because of the external imposition and distance from in-the-moment decision making, serve as a means of control (of instructors, students, and curriculum). Thus, while many recently released commercial products advertised as formative assessment suggest that their main use is to prepare students for summative assessment, most educators recognize formative assessment as "a systematic process to continually gather evidence about student learning" (Heritage, 141). This kind of authentic formative assessment, instructors contend, is rooted in instructional activity and is connected directly to the teaching and learning occurring at that moment (Pinchot & Brandt).

Over 30 years of research suggest formative assessment is a vital curricular component, proven to be highly effective in increasing student learning (Black & Wiliam 1998). Cizek distilled this research, identifying 10 elements across the studies that researchers have noted as important features (Cizek 8).

Formative assessment:

1. *Requires students to take responsibility for their own learning.*

2. *Communicates clear, specific learning goals.*

3. *Focuses on goals that represent valuable educational outcomes with applicability beyond the learning context.*

4. *Identifies the student's current knowledge/skills and the necessary steps for reaching the desired goals.*

5. *Requires development of plans for attaining the desired goals.*

6. *Encourages students to self-monitor progress toward the learning goals.*

7. *Provides examples of learning goals including, when relevant, the specific grading criteria or rubrics that will be used to evaluate the student's work.*

8. *Provides frequent assessment, including peer and student self-assessment and assessment embedded within learning activities.*

9. *Includes feedback that is non-evaluative, specific, timely, and related to the learning goals, and that provides opportunities for the student to revise and improve work products and deepen understandings.*

10. *Promotes metacognition and reflection by students on their work.*

Heritage further categorizes formative assessments into three types that all contribute to the learning cycle:

✓ *"on-the-fly" (those that happen during a class session),*

✓ *"planned-for-interaction" (those decided before instruction), and*

✓ *"curriculum-embedded" (embedded in the curriculum and used to gather data at significant points during the learning process).*

At the center of all this research is one underlying idea: Formative assessment is a constantly occurring process, a verb, a series of events in action, not a single tool or a static noun. In order for formative assessment to have an impact on instruction and student learning, instructors must be involved every step of the way and have the flexibility to make decisions throughout the assessment process. Instructors are "the primary agents, not passive consumers, of assessment information. It is their ongoing, formative assessments that primarily influence students' learning" (Joint Task Force on Assessment, Standard 2).

Formative Assessment as Stance

In order for instructors to be successful assessors, they must develop an "assessment literacy" (Gallagher & Turley): a deep understanding of why they assess, when they assess, and how they assess in ways that positively impact student learning. In addition, successful instructor assessors view assessment through an inquiry lens, using varying assessments to learn from and with their students in order to adjust classroom practices accordingly. Together these two qualities—a deep knowledge of assessment and an inquiry approach to assessment—create a particular stance toward assessment.

When instructors who hold this stance as knowledgeable inquirers are given the autonomy to make decisions about the assessment practices that will provide meaningful information in their own classrooms, formative assessment can indeed be powerful and productive, especially those assessments that are planned, designed, implemented, and studied by the classroom instructor (Stephens & Story). The most meaningful of these assessments provide information the instructor can use to better understand her students and to then support them in taking the next steps in their learning.

The best formative assessments are not focused exclusively on externally mandated learning outcomes but also on timely information that instructors can use to determine a student's current understanding and the areas that are nearly within the student's reach (Vygotsky). As knowledgeable inquirers, instructors are able to choose among a variety of tools and strategies that best suit the context of their own classrooms. Analogous to the work of ethnographers or instructor researchers, instructors use meaningful formative assessment to study students in action and the artifacts of their learning in order to better understand.

"Student Draft Conferences," Doherty cont.

> *[T]he conferences force me to be efficient in my grading, so that the essays are all done in time, and in the conferences, since they are so short. Typing all the comments out forces me to pick what I think is most important to talk about… students feel like this process is giving them sufficient feedback, and the difference between the rough and final drafts of essays has showed me that students are making changes to their work that are in line with my outcomes for the class.*

Over time, my time spent per essay started to increase, rather than decrease, as a consequence of the huge number of marks I placed on every essay as well as the time it took me to remember what the grademark was called and then find the right mark in the little pallet of comments.

This trend did not serve the students well because there was so much feedback that students were encouraged to just do what the marks told them without thinking about why they had made these errors, and I was marking so much that I was losing the ability to see trends that I could address with classroom instruction or activities. Worse yet, since the time per essay was increasing, I was having a harder time getting drafts back to students quickly, which meant their feedback came long after they had left the state of mind in which they wrote their drafts.

Reading Corner: Books on Teaching + Assessment — Literature, Sustained Reading + Teaching Writing

Below, please find one text that engages in and continues the conversation about the assessment of student learning from the perspective of sustained, close readings of literary texts. If you review this text or have read it previously, please send me a quick note about its value and limitations.
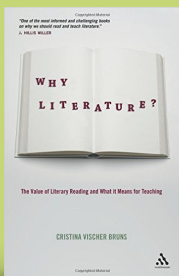
Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching by C. Vischer Bruns (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

From the publisher, "Cristina Vischer Bruns [a professor of English at LaGuardia Community College] offers a defense of the value of literature and suggests ways in which the problematic relationship between personal and academic reading may be overcome. J. Hillis Miller, UCI Distinguished Research Professor in the Departments of Comparative Literature and English at University of California, Irvine writes, "…Bruns argues [that we need literature] because a literary work is an ideal example of what D. W. Winnicott, one of the founders of object relations psychoanalysis, calls a 'transitional object'-an object, that is, halfway between the self and the external world. Such an object aids in the (primarily unconscious) discovery and transformation of the self. Bruns's teaching agenda is based not only on this theory of literature's 'why,' but also on her long face to face experience in the classroom. Rather than stressing analytical reading, she argues, teachers should encourage self-reflection in students about what happens to them in 'immersive reading.' In such reading the reader gets lost in the imaginary world the words on the page create. That can lead to a transition in selfhood. Distanced reading, analytical reading, may inhibit that transformation, though it can also serve as a way station toward a more powerful immersive reading."

"Formative Assessment," NCTE cont.

Tools and Strategies for Formative Assessment

> *Formative assessment is the lived, daily embodiment of a instructor's desire to refine practice based on a keener understanding of current levels of student performance, undergirded by the instructor's knowledge of possible paths of student development within the discipline and of pedagogies that support such development.*

As instructors conduct their assessment work from this stance of knowledgeable inquirers, they have many strategies and tools from which to choose. Successful instructor assessors carefully select or create the right assessment at the right time in order to inform instruction and support the learner, thoughtfully administering the assessment with the least disruption to the ongoing learning in the classroom (Serafini). These assessments might be grouped into four types —Observations, Conversations, Student Self-Evaluations, and Artifacts of Learning—briefly described below.

Observations

Careful observation is the foundation of a instructor's assessment work. Instructors who observe students engaged in language use and learning come to know their students' strengths and challenges and are then able to plan supportive classroom learning experiences. Learning to observe closely, to see beyond assumptions and predictions, is central to development of a formative assessment stance.

Example: *Checklists and Observation Guides*: Instructors gather information about pre-selected learning behaviors or interactions by marking tallies on a chart or keeping a record of examples of specific student actions (such as the types of questions being asked or the particular strategies being used).

Conversations

Based on questions they have about student learning, instructors may specifically ask students for further information by conducting surveys, interviews, or conferences. These may take a broad-brush look at general assessment information or a targeted look at specific aspects of learning.

Example: *Conferences*: Instructors invite students to share specific information about their intentions, processes, and/or products in order to help both instructor and student better understand the student's learning and identify next steps. Instructors often talk with students about the processes they use to select a topic for a writing piece, or the writing strategies they learned in a recent writing project.

Student Self-Evaluations

An important component of formative assessment, student self-evaluations are deliberate efforts to elicit student perspectives on their own learning. Students may reflect on progress toward a goal, on processes used for reading or writing, on new goals, or on lingering questions. Self-evaluations encourage students to monitor their own learning and learning needs and serve as an additional source of information on student learning.

Example: *Rubrics and Checklists*: Using pre-determined or student-generated lists of quality indicators, students assess their own work and use the information to revise or to plan future learning experiences. Process Reflections: Students write reflections that highlight the process they used to create particular artifacts or understandings and lessons they learned that will influence the way they approach similar work in the future.

Artifacts of Learning

Working alone or, preferably, with others, instructors review data about individual students or groups of students for the purpose of planning future learning experiences.

Example: Collect a variety of sources of information on a single learner (case study) in order to identify patterns of understanding across the data set. Data may include samples of student work and notes based on classroom observations.

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See the original article for the list of references and a useful annotated bibliography on research/theory on and practical applications of formative assessment.

"Robin Hood Tale," Roche cont.

On the other hand, everything about the Columbia College curriculum seemed to prioritize the notion that the students' voices mattered, first and foremost. The Columbia students had simply to buy one affordable collection of essays. With that collection they received extensive exposure to quality non-fiction prose. I was given four well-developed essay assignments for the sixteen-week semester, and each assignment asked the students to engage in writing that was always personal, even while it was often also public. They read essays by Marcia Aldrich, Scott Russell Sanders, Amy Tan, Brian Doyle, Ariel levy, Joyce Carol Oates, David Sedaris, and Jamaica Kincaid, to name a few. Each writing assignment called upon the students to consider themselves in an analysis of a work of art, or to write about a personal discovery, and the final assignment asked them to develop a "a big question" about the world that they hoped to explore rather than answer. In each of these assignments, the students factored as an important part of the subject matter.

> As I watched Philip read his narrative to a group of encouraging faculty and students, his point about dignity being the only truly important thing to him stuck with me. The dignity of every student can be cultivated through the first-person nonfiction narrative.

Later when I was hired full-time at Wright College and gave up my adjunct position at Columbia College, I reflected upon the stark differences between public and private higher education as I had seen it firsthand. It seemed important that I should endeavor to write the kind of enriching and detailed, student-centered Comp I curriculum that I had been afforded at Columbia. In the end I developed four learning modules for a sixteen week Comp I semester. Here I will describe the module that I recommend for the beginning of the semester, the student-centered nonfiction narrative. I want the students to know from the start that their voices matter to me and to the academic writing world. I kept what I found of value in the textbook, such as defined terms like "voice," "concrete details," and "plot and conflict," but I no longer require the students to purchase a textbook. It seems unfair and impractical to ask them to buy a book that we might only consult for a third of the semester. Instead, I put my copy of *Best American Essays* (*BAE*) on reserve in the library, the same collection that the Columbia students had been using.

The nonfiction narrative learning module, five to six weeks long, seems like the best style of writing for me to begin to understand who my students are. To begin, I assigned essay readings in the *BAE*, keeping to the section of essays in the table of contents labeled "The Personal Voice: Identity, Diversity, Self-Discovery." After the reading discussion sessions, I assign each student a theme from a list of themes we have discovered during reading discussions. Some are given

> If we train the first-year college writer to understand that a thesis statement, topic sentences, evidence and analysis, and MLA format, are the cornerstones of meaningful writing, they will never dream about being writers or yearn for a career path that incorporates these components of the essay.

"discrimination" or "isolation" and others "cultural identity" or "gender bias." With their themes in hand, students plan nonfiction narrative drafts based on a "one day in the life of" structure. In other words, I do not want them to write a summary of their entire junior year of high school, so I ask them to identify a single experience, perhaps just an afternoon, where one event changed the way they thought about their theme and their world. Through storyboarding with pen and paper, students plan a beginning, a middle with a conflict, and an ending, using sketches and captions.

The final nonfiction narrative works best if it is a maximum of three double-spaced pages because this forces students to shave off the fat and keep only the essential parts of the plot. Otherwise, they have a tendency to write a very long list of events that do little to hook the reader. With that very bare plot "skeleton" in place, the students add some lean meat to the skeleton via concrete details, metaphor, and voice, paying particular attention to word choice. We define these terms and identify them in the essays we have read. And finally, I stress universal significance. The stories need to be honest enough, truthful enough, and deep enough to have thoroughly addressed the universal theme, while remaining entertaining through voice and personal through authentic experience. I discourage stories about the game-winning shot or about grandma's funeral, stressing that it is often the very everyday ordinary experiences and observations where we are confronted with universal truths about human nature.

After four weeks the students turn in their third and final nonfiction narratives. I stress that they should have a meaningful way to share their writing with one another in order to underscore the idea that the purpose of writing is to foster readership. And it was Columbia College to the rescue again. I remembered that my Comp I students at Columbia had been invited to submit their writing to the campus radio station, where, if selected, their essays would be edited for radio broadcast, and they would record themselves reading their personal narratives in podcast form. This immediately made me think about *This American Life (TAL)*, the radio program.

I played some of the *TAL* episodes in class before workshops, fostering the students' ability to develop an ear for radio storytelling and to demonstrate how an ordinary person's life is transformed into a topic for a compelling story through the radio medium. Then, I grouped students who had written about the same theme, and commissioned each group to create a podcast modeled after the *TAL* structure-three acts with an introductory prologue, incorporating sound effects and music. I asked a staff person from Wright's IT department to visit the class in computer lab to assist me in teaching students how to use Audacity Software, a free download. The students created podcasts over a two week time period both in and out of class. On the last day of the module, the students attended a planned sharing event where each group played its podcast on a laptop with speakers, and the students filled out a rubric that provided feedback to each group on their work.

I also created a second option. This alternate plan was to schedule live readings of the students' nonfiction narratives in the classroom. It works best for two or three readings to be scheduled at the beginning of each class meeting over the duration of the semester (or part of the semester depending on the number of students in a class). Each class meeting begins with a few students' voices preceding that of my own and the classroom is a very student-centered place as a result. To enhance the readings, students were required to create visual presentations, where images that were thematically significant to their narratives were projected onto the classroom screen via Power Point or Prezi during each reading.

As is the responsibility of an instructor who develops curriculum, I have researched the intersection of composition and creative nonfiction writing in the college composition classroom. I have found there is quite a bit of debate about it. In Thomas Newkirk's book *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, he notes "I have always believed that students appreciate the chance to write about their lives and interests-and the regular opportunity to read these accounts has literally kept me teaching composition" (39). My 15+ years of experience as a composition teacher has led me to agree with Newkirk. The essay my student, Aelani, wrote about buying drugs for her girlfriend and being held at gunpoint by a drug dealer was far more engaging than if she had written her opinion on the city's need for more bike paths. Aelani very bravely read her captivating, raw, and honest story to the class, and then, ultimately, dropped the class and checked into rehab. I wondered if the task of revisiting that harrowing time in her life prompted her to reflect on her choices and her life's path. I hope so. Another of my students, Philip, wrote a poetic narrative about his years as a drug addict living in a drug den without family and without dignity.

ELR Assessment | 2015-2016 What We Did, What We Learned + How We Plan To Intervene

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Process | For the academic year 2015-2016, Wright College shifted its assessment focus from critical thinking to the second of the General Education student learning outcomes, which focuses on academic communication that meets the expectations of diversely constituted audiences. The criteria ELR uses to assess critical essays in English 101 include "purpose and audience," specifically, assessing the degree to which students demonstrate competency in adopting consistently and appropriately the voice, tone and level of formality customary in academic writing. Given, we have been using the same rubric, with minor modifications, for the past two academic years, we have two semesters worth of assessment data on student competency in "purpose + audience."

Our process remained unchanged from the past academic year's, namely, at the end of fall 2015, faculty teaching English 101, after having met in their cohorts for the purpose of discussing and workshopping critical essay assignments, which met the requirements shared earlier in the term, assessed their students' final critical essays using the English 101 Critical Essay Rubric (CER). Exemplars of each level of competencies were discussed among members of cohorts; a majority of the completed rubrics from the English 101 sections were submitted for analysis.

Knowledge Gained | Based on two semesters (spring and fall 2015) of assessment data, at the end of English 101, most students are performing at the competency level of "Beginning Apprentice" or above in "Purpose + Audience" (92% in spring 2015 and 94% in fall 2015) with a majority of students performing at the level of "Advanced Apprentice" or higher (71% in spring 2015 and 68% in fall 2015).

Spring 2015	Emerging Scholars	Advanced Apprentice	Beginning Apprentice	Novice
Process	27	32	28	13
Purpose + Audience	32	39	21	8
Exposition + Argument	25	39	27	9
Organization + Development	22	33	31	14
Critical Thinking	25	30	32	13
Mechanics	17	36	22	25
Fall 2015	Emerging Scholars	Advanced Apprentice	Beginning Apprentice	Novice
Process	29	39	26	6
Purpose + Audience	29	39	26	6
Exposition + Argument	22	38	32	8
Organization + Development	21	40	31	8
Critical Thinking	19	33	37	11
Syntax + Usage	22	45	30	3

Note: All numbers are percentages.

From these data, we conclude that at the end of the first semester of a two-semester course sequence in first-year composition, students are at least satisfactorily, but more often than not, well to very well prepared to write with the appropriate sense of purpose and audience within the context of academic discourse.

Proposed Interventions | Despite the promising numbers and in order to support continued (as well as sustained) improvement in the teaching, the department assessment committee has recommended (spring 2016); developed (spring and fall 2016); and, will deploy (spring 2017) a number of supportive interventions. We will develop and/or provide:

1. A diagnostic essay for use during the first week of the semester in English 101 in order to better assess the learning occurring between the beginning and end of the semester. This might be a way to provide differentiated instruction for students, especially those at either extreme of the competency spectrum, i.e., "Emerging Scholar" and "Novice." Additionally, this might also allow opportunities to support incremental growth/achievement, e.g., from "Novice" to "Beginning Apprentice" by the end of the semester, in ways that affirm learning as a growth process rather than as a specific "point" of achievement.
2. A handbook that defines and discusses the multiple types of and motivations for plagiarism with strategies for addressing them.
3. A rubric designed to support instructors as they parse the individual skills associated with each of the criteria assessed in the CER. The intention is to help instructors identify and track specific skills achievement over the entire course.
4. A rubric that "transliterates" the existing CER into student-friendly language, thereby enabling students to think more robustly about and take charge of charting their progress relative to the criteria assessed via the CER.
5. A definitional document to help students understand the terminology used within each criterion of the CER as well as guiding questions to direct their achievement of the skills associated with the criteria.
6. A survey regarding instructor experience with the CER. It will be disseminated in fall 2016.
7. Three modules and introductory (contextualizing) essays for English 101 as well as a document aligning the work in each of those modules with the CER.

"Robin Hood Tale," Roche cont.

I encouraged Philip to submit his piece to an on-campus reading event that took place recently at Wright (which was entirely planned and executed by two adjunct professors), and the piece was selected. As I watched Philip read his narrative to a group of encouraging faculty and students, his point about dignity being the only truly important thing to him stuck with me. The dignity of every student can be cultivated through the first-person nonfiction narrative.

Wendy Bishop confirms Newkirk's sentiment when she writes, "Trying to work toward emotional, spiritual, familial, intellectual, professional, political, and the big ETC. of truths is not just part of, but is the process of writing, of composing nonfiction. It is the golden mean, too, of a version of academic life that many of us might choose" (286). Until recently, academic writing-the research essay, the argument essay-which are traditionally impersonal in voice and content, have been held up as the standard of what college students should be able to do. In a multitude of disciplines they will be expected to leave themselves out of the equation as they demonstrate a written understanding of one topic or another. However, I argue that at Wright College, where completion rates are low, below 20%, it seems counter intuitive to push the same pedagogy over and over even in the face of a majority's failure to earn a degree.

If we train the first-year college writer to understand that a thesis statement, topic sentences, evidence and analysis, and MLA format, are the cornerstones of meaningful writing, they will never dream about being writers or yearn for a career path that incorporates these components of the essay. And what of that? What is the career in which a writer sticks to a strict formula in order to write well? Isn't it only to be found in the career of an academic? Where does this writing exist outside of academia? In any op-ed piece or blog or travel piece, in any style of writing where the writer is paid for his or her work, there is always the personal. The first-person anecdote is mixed in with the critical analysis of the issue at hand. Bishop writes toward the end of her article, "…how do we create classroom cultures within which the essay needs to be written? We treat the student essayist as we treat ourselves, as essayists and authors of creative nonfiction" (271).

> *Until recently, academic writing-the research essay, the argument essay-which are traditionally impersonal in voice and content, have been held up as the standard of what college students should be able to do…I argue that at Wright College, where completion rates are low, below 20%, it seems counter intuitive to push the same pedagogy over and over even in the face of a majority's failure to earn a degree.*

It is my contention that college students, and community college students especially, are more likely to hold on, to make it through the first year of college, if they are an integral part of their own education. If their voices and experiences and observations are heard, then they will begin to see themselves as a necessary part of the education equation, rather than as infiltrating outsiders whose voices have no value.

Lastly, I feel I owe it to Columbia College Chicago to write about a student I had there who went by the name Salt. Salt wrote just about the most fascinatingly poetic personal narrative I had ever read. He wrote about rap lyrics and how writing rap lyrics kept him busy and off the city streets, where he was liable to be gobbled up by the encroaching gang culture. He submitted his essay to the Columbia campus radio station, and it was selected to be read on air. In his narrative, Salt also revealed that it was his wealthy drug-dealing uncle who was paying his college tuition. At the end of the semester, Salt confided to me that this uncle had been incarcerated and would no longer be able to pay Salt's tuition or dorm fees. He was terrified to return to his old neighborhood where he had been branded an uppity outcast, and ultimately chose to move to Florida with a cousin and enroll in community college. Given the very finite set of choices he had, maybe he made the right decision. And I hope when he gets to that Florida community college that someone has taken the time to develop a curriculum that fosters his creativity and affirms to him that he matters.

For more details about the ideas and the assignment featured here, please contact Professor Roche at broche1@ccc.edu.

"Student Draft Conferences," Doherty cont.

This semester, I am still taking in all my essays on Turnitin, but I have abandoned grademarks in favor of fewer comments and 1-on-1 conferences. Instead, I collect the essay on Turnitin, fill out the rubric, and type a comment into the long-form comment window that Turnitin offers.

That means that there is not a single mark on the essay until the end, where there is a rubric and a short paragraph of text. If I notice that I am repeating a comment a lot, I copy it into a Word file that I keep as a log of comments I type frequently. That file has headings for each assignment, and I can use it as a clipboard to hold comments that I expect to paste into many essays and then use it to track trends in student writing so that I can later respond to them in class. Students then come to a ten-minute conference with me in my office to talk through the essay.

> *Over time, my time spent per essay started to increase……This [trend] did not serve the students that well because there was so much feedback that students were encouraged to just do what the marks told them without thinking about why they had made these errors, and I was marking so much that I was losing the ability to see trends that I could address with classroom instruction or activities. Worse yet…I was having a harder time getting drafts back to students quickly, which meant their feedback came long after they had left the state of mind in which they wrote their drafts.*

I have used this new approach on three essay assignments this semester. On the positive side, the conferences force me to be efficient in my grading, so that the essays are all done in time, and in the conferences, since they are so short. Typing all the comments out forces me to pick what I think is most important to talk about. The appointments also require students to check in with me since they have to come to my office hours for at least one appointment for every essay. Some informal surveying of the class has showed me that students feel like this process is giving them sufficient feedback, and the difference between the rough and final drafts of essays has showed me that students are making changes to their work that are in line with my outcomes for the class. However, I have not done any calculation to see whether this new way of handling drafts increases or decreases the change in grade between the draft and the final version of their essays.

On the negative side, the students, at this point, receive almost no feedback on issues in grammar, usage and mechanics. In addition, since I am doing so many sets of conferences, I do not want to use class time to do them, so students are being required to show up at a time when they are not regularly scheduled to come to class, and that can be hard on students with tight schedules. Between reading the drafts, holding the conferences, and planning and teaching my classes, the weeks in which these conferences happen are really intense, and there is little time to do anything else. If I do this for four essays, that is four weeks in a sixteen-week semester where I am out of commission.

Despite these disadvantages, I am planning on continuing with this model of fewer comments supplemented with student conferences. The speed at which I am able to get feedback to the students and the increased individual contact with students in these conferences outweigh the thoroughness of the feedback that I was providing by using GradeMark, and now that I have done the conferences for a semester, I know to plan for those weeks to be periods when I am not getting much else done and work ahead in my other duties in preparation. However, if someone were able to exercise a little more restraint with those grademarks, they could also be a great tool for more efficient feedback.

For more details about the ideas and the strategies featured here, please contact Professor Doherty at tdoherty1@ccc.edu.

Next Steps for ELR Assessment

Future-focus: In addition to the interventions noted on page 6, ELR Assessment will:

1. Assess our students facility and fluency with technology because the college will be shifting its focus to the third General Education student learning outcome (SLO), i.e., *demonstrate quantitative and technological literacy, especially computer literacy, for interpreting data, reasoning, and problem solving;*

2. Revisit the work of the English 101 cohorts in order to better support professional development of instructors teaching English 101;

3. Shift our attention to English 102, subjecting it to the same kind of thoughtful and rigorous exploration via assessment as 101 with the intention of supporting evidence-based improvements in teaching and learning. This will coincide with and support the work of the 101/102 committee;

4. Continue rethinking the structure, content and purpose of the existing assessment tool (the CER) with the intention of increasing its alignment with contemporary approaches to teaching academic writing in English 101 and the second semester of first-year composition, English 102; and,

5. Continue to think of our work as a committee as a process for learning more about what/how we are teaching and developing ways to continue to improve/transform our teaching, i.e., assessment is not a science, but it is a valuable tool for talking among ourselves about what we do and how/why we do what we do.

Teaching + Scholarship: Many thanks to Professors Anndrea Ellison, Bill Marsh Bridget Roche, Suzanne Sanders, Tim Doherty and Valerie Pell for writing insightful and engaging essays on the art of teaching writing for *AN.*

Assessment News (*AN*) plans to publish up to two faculty-written articles each issue. Generally, they will reflect the following foci: one article that is practical, reflective and of specific-immediate use; and another article that is meditative, conceptual and critical (and a bit reflective) of broad-deferred use.

Interested in writing for *Assessment News?* Please send an email to hdoss@ccc.edu with your interest and ideas. All ideas are welcomed and considered, even those critical or uncertain of "assessment" as a process and persistent theme in higher education, especially free, public and urban colleges and universities.

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Assessment Geeks, Wanted: *Do you daydream about assignment redesign? After a particularly successful or disappointing class session are you compelled to think about the reason it did or did not work?*

If you answered "yes" to one or both of the above questions, ***ELR Assessment needs you!*** In 2016-2017, the Department of English, Literature & Reading Assessment Committee will work on multiple interventions to support teaching and learning in English 101-102.

Interested? Please send an email to hdoss@ccc.edu with your day/time availability in fall 2016. Part-time faculty are welcome to join!

A final note about the work of assessment…

The work of assessment is…*interesting*. It is a near-alien process of combining the challenge of rendering visible that which many of us do by instinct. Further, it requires the dissection of the teaching and learning processes with tools (e.g., rubrics) and language (e.g., summative and formative) that, at best, elucidate one or two unconsidered aspects of the teaching and learning processes, which can be leveraged to improve approaches to assignments and classroom experiences, and, at worst obscure the difficult to articulate, but critical moments in which a student begins to believe herself capable of learning and an instructor feels the "rush" of a lecture, text, assignment and classroom discussion synchronizing unexpectedly well. *Frustrating.*

Yet, a significant part of the value of negotiating the language and tools of assessment in the midst of doing the actual work of teaching emerges from the collaborations and conversations had among colleagues, who are equal parts suspicious of, exhilarated by and committed to the need to know and understand that which enables transformative learning and supports effective teaching.

Special thanks to the exemplary work and outstanding collaboration of the 2014-2016 Assessment Committee members: Professors Anndrea Ellison, Bill Marsh, Bridget Roche, Cydney Topping, Julia Cohen, Susan Grace, Suzanne Sanders, Tara Whitehair, Tatiana Uhoch, Valerie Pell, and Vincent Bruckert. Their dedication, curiosity and humor have been sustaining.

Note: Thanks to Professor Sanders for directing me to memes on assessment in the midst of midterm mania...it was a hard choice between Eddard Stark (Sean Bean, *Game of Thrones*) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne, *The Matrix*)!

Image: memegenerator.net