

Howe Center for Writing Excellence Grant Report

I. Background

The Department of Classics has a significant history of serious engagement with student writing. We were among the earliest departments to invite the new Director of the Howe Center to confer with the department, which he did over several weeks. Though those interactions significantly improved our writing assignments as a department, several problems remained.

A. Need

Particularly in our extensive range of civilization courses, i.e., courses in translation, the department has long felt some discontent with the vagueness and disparities in our writing assignments required at different levels of courses (100, 200, 300, 400), which also represent different class sizes (our 100 level classes normally number at least fifty students, upper level courses are generally capped at twenty-five, but often exceed this limit). In this context, how much of our grading should be directed at the mechanics of writing (grammar, spelling, punctuations, etc.)? What is the appropriate relation between the reading skills we are building and the writing assignments? At what levels should term papers be required? What specific goals are appropriate for assignments in a foundation course? At what point is theory made an explicit part of the course and of the writing assignments? At what point should students be expected to engage with secondary scholarship? At what point should assignments move from specific topics to encouraging students to do independent research?

B. Goal

The goal of this project was to attempt to clarify as many of these questions as was practicable in the time available to us. Since all of our 100-300 level courses are part of two thematic sequences offered by the department, we soon decided to concentrate our efforts on articulating the goals in terms of each of these three levels, with attention also to how they build within a larger sequence. In addition, we were especially concerned with articulating the differences between 200 and 300 level courses, something the department has had some difficulty doing in the past. On the advice of the Director, we decided to focus in tandem on the desired reading skills and the sorts of writing assignments that would best develop them.

In short, we sought to:

1. Build more integration and consistency in terms of our expectations of student writing and learning outcomes across courses at the same level (100, 200, 300-level), bearing in mind the need for flexibility given the range of course sizes, individual teaching methods, and course contents.
2. Enhance our overall outcomes with regard to student writing in our thematic sequence, building on skills required at each level.
3. Clarify expectations for students and instructors within each level of the thematic sequence and with regard to the department's ultimate goals for learning.

C. Team members and other participants

Peter Rose, Denise McCoskey, and Carrie Galsworthy were the core members of this committee, and the remaining members of the department provided constructive feedback at all stages of the process.

II. What We Did

The core members of the committee met frequently beginning last summer, and consulted periodically with the Howe Center Director. During the academic year 2008-9, the core group met at least 4-5 times each semester on its own. In addition, the core group led a total of 4 departmental meetings with the entire Classics faculty to discuss various stages of our deliberations and get their feedback.

The first task was to determine what discipline-specific skills were needed to allow the students at the end of the sequence to complete a research project of their own design. Once the committee identified these skills, we decided which skills were more basic and should be taught at the 100-level, and then considered how to build on these skills with each succeeding level, while adding new skills to the students' arsenal. With department consensus, we determined that the focus of the 100-level courses should be on making students familiar with primary source material, both visual and literary, as well as the people and cultures that produced it. The 200-level courses would train students how to handle contradictory and complementary evidence from primary sources, and how to examine the contributions of scholars in understanding the ancient world. The 300-level courses would then focus on training students how to integrate information from both primary and secondary sources, developing their own research questions from research topics. By the time the students arrive at the 400-level, they would then be prepared to contribute to the scholarly conversation themselves in even greater depth.

III. What We Produced

The committee produced a nine-page chart that set out in tandem the various reading skills and requisite writing skills that students need to learn at each level in working with primary and secondary sources, such as, recognizing the influence of form or genre and context on primary sources or understanding the explicit or implicit theoretical assumptions of scholars and how this affects evaluation of the secondary sources. For each skill, we also determined what sort of writing assignments instructors could develop that would allow students to learn and practice each skill. These assignments could involve a range of methods (e.g., informal in-class writing, in-class exams, or formal essay writing) and would allow instructors to assess the students' proficiency with each set of skills and determine their overall success. The department gave feedback on this process along the way.

IV. How We Assessed/Will Assess Product

One way we assessed our efforts was by periodically bringing drafts of our chart and other ideas to the department and listening carefully to their feedback. For example, at our first meeting our initial failure to address visual and purely historical as opposed to literary texts became clear, and we adjusted our further efforts accordingly. The high

level of approval of our final chart suggests that our efforts were judged very useful by the department as a whole. While we were attaining continual feedback throughout this year, we anticipate assessing our efforts more in the future as the department has agreed to implement these guidelines in the upcoming academic year. We will then revisit the guidelines after two semesters to further assess their usefulness in practice. The department has also created a site on Blackboard to share successful assignments, distribute helpful resources (such as useful web material) and compare techniques and methods.

V. Impact of Project

A. During time of grant

Our various discussions with the department increased everyone's awareness of the need for greater clarity about our expectations as well as the inevitable differences between specific courses and specific instructors. The degree of consensus arrived was nonetheless gratifying; many in the department, including all the core group, used this as an opportunity to critically evaluate their own classroom practices as well as their contribution to the department's overall goals in terms of teaching student writing. The department has further created a site on Blackboard (mentioned above) to share teaching materials, as well as provide links to resources for more specialized topics such as avoidance of plagiarism and proper citation of sources.

B. Probable impact in the future

Several members of the department indicated that they would revise their syllabi in the light of our discussions. We were still unclear about how we might communicate our expectations about writing to our students across the thematic sequence (i.e., whether to make some version of our chart available to them or not), but it is clear that the project has enhanced discussion of teaching among department faculty, and we hope that will continue in the future. In addition, the department also intends to explore making our chart the basis for assessing our thematic sequence courses in response to Liberal Education's request for greater assessment of course outcomes and student learning. While we were unable to account for our capstone courses (at the 400-level) in this project, we anticipate that this discussion can be extended to make goals at that level clearer as well. An unanticipated impact from this project was the way it has encouraged the department to develop long-term goals for course development and for planning our sequence of course offerings.