

Methods of Assessment in English 1A

Goal One: Improve Students' Writing Skills By Emphasizing the Writing Process

Goal Two: Expect Students to be Responsible for their Education

Pre-Assessment Project Pedagogy: (Assignments can be provided.)

Prior to this project, I developed my assignments based on a number of pedagogical beliefs and goals; these were:

- Any student can improve if s/he invest time and effort;
- Each student is unique and brings the ability to contribute;
- Writing assignments should build upon each other in complexity throughout the semester;
- Reading, thinking, and writing are recursive in nature and are intertwined in freshman composition, and
- Writing is a process.

My goals for the students were:

- Be able to read critically;
- Be able to articulate opinions, interpretations, etc. in a coherent written form;
- Be able to multitask;
- Be able to synthesize multiple sources into one written paper;
- Be aware of and utilize the writing process to improve as writers.

With these beliefs and goals in mind, I developed a semester where writing assignments were separate from one another in topic and skills needed; however, they overlapped one another requiring multitasking. The semester began with an in-class, non-graded, summary of a brief text that also allowed personal opinion. This occurred the first day of class and helped reinforce the first two student goals as well as serving notice that writing would take place in a variety of locations and each

essay would be different. This in-class essay was followed by three more “outside” essays that focused on responses to our readings of expository prose; before any writing began, class discussions were held. Each of these next three essays built in complexity adding the student goal of synthesizing multiple sources; as we discussed the various types of rhetorical modes used by writers, students learned how to question texts and read more critically. In addition, each assignment began with prewriting activities and ended with multiple opportunities for revision before proofreading and editing, thereby reinforcing the writing process. By the time we reached the final “outside” essay—an 8–10 page research project—the students had been exposed to all of the student goals, and the pedagogical beliefs had been reinforced.

Assessment generally occurred in two ways; the first consisted comparing student writing as it progressed throughout the semester. By tracking the improvements students made in their writing, the assessment was anecdotal and focused on the subjectivity of the instructor. The second assessment was gathered by prompting students to assess the class, the assignments, the readings, the textbooks, and other miscellaneous areas at the end of the semester. While this method allowed those students who remained in class all semester to assess the course, it did not provide any opportunity for students to discuss their weaknesses or challenges prior to dropping.

Assessment Project Pedagogy: (Appendix C is the handout given to students.)

Class Focus: A big difference in this English 1A class had nothing to do with the assessment project, but it deserves mention. I had decided over the summer to base this class on a single topic, the Vietnam War, in the book *Negotiating Differences: Cultural Case Studies for Composition* by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. This textbook focuses on comparing rhetoric from both sides of the debate and analyzing which is most effective; it also offers classroom approaches to synthesizing all of these readings into fairly complex written assignments. Since this was not part

of the assessment project, I will merely state that a single topic course has both advantages and disadvantages, and I am still weighing both.

Portfolio Assessment: In addition to the information in the book *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, I accessed information on portfolio assessment from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff. I had never used portfolio assessment, and I was interested in learning more about this method of writing evaluation. Perhaps the best description of the advantages of portfolio assessment can be found in Elbow and Belanoff's text *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*. Basically, this type of evaluation allows the instructor the opportunity to become a writing coach; since writing is evaluated only twice during the semester (midterm and end of term), the instructor becomes less intimidating and more approachable. This is important in a writing course where one-on-one writing conferences are successful supplements to the classroom learning. In addition, portfolios allow students to become better writers over a period of weeks before evaluation and don't base initial essay evaluation on the skills students bring into the classroom. With this in mind, the midterm portfolio was weighted as 30% of the final grade while the end of term portfolio was worth 50%. The writing assignments were weekly in nature as students were expected to submit a two-page response to reading each Monday. These two-page responses were the seeds of the final portfolio essays. Finally, this type of writing evaluation emphasizes the writing process.

Results—Goal One: (Two samples included—one from a student who failed; the other from one who passed). The 15 students who remained in the course until the end of the semester saw tremendous improvement in their writing skills as reflected in the cover letters to their portfolios. Their end of term portfolios displayed the ability to read critically, to interpret, and to synthesize outside sources into their own writing. Of the 15 students, 12 passed, but the three who did not pass did not finish the research project for the final portfolio. It was disappointing that more students did not remain in the class, but I cannot

conclude that the cause was the embedded assessment techniques; it could simply have been an anomaly for this particular section of English 1A.

Results—Goal Two: Allowing students to be responsible for their own educations is perhaps the more difficult of the two goals because it causes more frustration than writing (which I didn't think was possible). Several of the students, who dropped the course before the end of the term, complained that by postponing the date of evaluating student writing, they had to wait to drop. They "knew" they wouldn't succeed, so they did not understand why they could not eliminate the class prior to midterm (the first scheduled evaluation).

Reading Journal: The second component in the course embedded assessment was the reading journal; this journal served as the location for students to capture responses to the assigned readings. These responses became vital to success, as the portfolio assignments required the ability to move between readings and discuss their differences and similarities in content, purpose, and audience.

Results—Goal One: Students who were successful maintained the reading journal to some extent. The journal served them as the location for commonalities and differences between the various readings.

Results—Goal Two: Because the journal was not graded or required, students who did not want to do this extra work experienced no negative response from the instructor. However, this journal was an important element in succeeding in the class and in owning the acquisition of education, and this was discussed in class continuously.

Process (Writing) Journal: This journal served as the foundation for what the students would include in their cover letters (to be discussed). This

was the vehicle they could use to write about the difficulties and frustrations they experienced during the production of their essays. Again, those students who were successful maintained this journal to some extent.

Results—Goals One and Two: See Reading Journal.

Cover Letter: The cover letter originated as a cross between the analytic memo found in Chapter 12 of *Classroom Assessment Techniques* and a similar letter found in the Elbow/Belanoff textbook *A Community of Writers*. This letter was a wonderful assessment technique because it forced students to truly consider where they were strong and where they needed help.

Results—Goal One: This was perhaps the most effective and versatile assessment vehicle embedded in this course. It allowed students to “dialogue” with the instructor and express those areas where help is needed. This can be difficult for students to admit in a face-to-face conference. This type of assessment vehicle pinpoints specific areas where skills (in this case, writing skills) can be affected directly.

Results—Goal Two: The most successful students in academia are those who are able to identify where they need help. This letter helped these students acquire this skill in regard to their writing.

Miscellaneous: As a normal practice, I require some type of written course assessment at the conclusion of the semester. I have included the student responses to this requirement. I did not embed this as an assessment technique, so there is no further discussion.

Post-Assessment:

If they are to be effective, any embedded assessment techniques need to be binary in nature; they need to inform students and instructors. On my

side, the techniques embedded in English 1A caused more work during the semester, but they have resulted in the following conclusions:

- To improve student writing, writing must be taught as a process especially allowing multiple drafts and revision;
- For students to succeed, they must assume responsibility for their education;
- Instructor comments on drafts are a vital element to student success;
- Allowing students to learn and improve before evaluating their writing can be both frustrating and invigorating;
- A single topic course allows students to enter into an argument more deeply, but if students do not like the topic, it can be frustrating;
- The cover letter serves to establish a dialogue between student and instructor that is reciprocal in nature; (This will be part of my assessment for all future classes and has evolved into a verbal contract letter at the beginning of the semester--sample enclosed.);
- To succeed as the semester progresses, students need to develop some type of reading journal and use it to improve their critical reading skills, and
- The process (writing) journal was not an effective assessment tool.