

Composition Forum 24, Fall 2011
<http://compositionforum.com/issue/24/>

Utilizing Strategic Assessment to Support FYC Curricular Revision at Murray State University

SHARE    ... [\[http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum\]](http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum)

Paul Walker and Elizabeth Myers

Abstract: The first-year composition requirement at Murray State University was revised in 2008 from a 6-credit-hour, two-semester sequence to a 4-credit-hour, one-semester course. The revision overtly emphasizes critical reading, writing, and inquiry, while addressing the realities of the institution's resources for teaching first-year composition. This profile describes the reasons behind the revision and the process of its implementation, contextualizing the change within the background of the university and burgeoning writing program. The methods and results of an assessment of the revised course in comparison to the previous course sequence are outlined in depth, along with how the assessment guides the instruction, administration, and future assessment of writing at the university.

In Fall 2009, the first-year composition (FYC) requirement at Murray State University transitioned from a 6-credit-hour, two-semester sequence (ENG 101/102) to a 4-credit-hour, one semester course (ENG 105). The initial decision to make this revision stemmed from the labor conditions for contingent faculty in our department and the sense that the FYC curriculum could be invigorated with a fresh look at objectives, outcomes, and structure. Yet the context for these revisions, as we explain later, afforded us a chance to do something more: to contribute to changing perceptions about writing on campus and about the role that FYC can play in supporting students' on-going writing development. In particular, the revision enabled us to foreground to a greater degree the critical inquiry of ideas *through* reading and writing, avoiding overemphasis on "general skills" that can impede rhetorical sensitivity to writing's complexity. Since the revision was adopted in 2009, students and FYC instructors have expressed satisfaction and praise for the changes. Those responses testify to the success of the course objectives, which have been strongly influenced by current writing theories and recommendations by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). We are heartened by the pedagogical results of the curricular revision, and the process for its approval across the university points to interesting junctures of disciplinary expertise, collegial expectations, administrative objectives, and the "culture" of assessment locally and nationally. Assessment didn't drive the curricular and structural changes, but our designed assessment comparing our old and new course design—and comparing student writing under the previous and revised curricula—was useful for confirming to others in the university that our efforts to address "best practices" from a disciplinary perspective are well founded.

Writing, as any rhetoric and composition scholar knows, evokes strong emotions from people, especially among faculty who complain about students' writing abilities. Those outside our field sometimes distrust our expertise in teaching academic writing, offering up their own ideas for the best ways to ensure quality student writing—ideas that are often current-traditional in nature. For example, despite numerous faculty workshops and a body of research that clearly shows the detriments of using grammar as a central teaching focus, the first solution to less-than-stellar student writing proposed by many outside our discipline is: "Teach the students grammar." Direct assessment of student writing,

in our situation, provided a way to justify our theory- and context-based curricular and structural revision. Although we are uncomfortable with the need to "prove" our expertise in writing instruction pedagogy and practice to outside interests through direct assessments, the results of our assessment confirmed our decision to change the structure of our first-year composition course. The process for revising our course, despite being necessarily contextual to our institution, nevertheless may hold value for other institutions that may be considering a similar structural revision based on similar circumstances.

We know that Murray State's writing program is not the first to offer a one-semester FYC requirement for the general population of students; yet describing the change allows us to illustrate the value of thoughtful response to institutional realities that might otherwise hinder efforts to conform to proven models of writing programs. Further, comparing the two-course sequence to the one-course revision shows how assessment can be valuable within an institution as well as of interest to others who are affected by writing assessment's administrative influence. Comparing results of a "traditional" and a "revised" curricula is a common assessment practice, but comparative assessments measuring the efficacy of distinctive structural changes such as we did with our ENG 105 course, if they exist, are not readily available.

Our assessment builds on the gains that have been made in writing assessment, guided by at least two decades of holistic scoring research (e.g. Williamson and Huot; O'Neill, Moore, and Huot; Freitag-Ericsson and Haswell). Calibrated holistic scoring by writing teachers has so far defended writing assessment from widespread machine scoring that keeps being offered as a solution to the inefficiencies and biases of humans. Nonetheless, we recognize that any large-scale writing assessment can oversimplify the complexity of the act of writing or detrimentally transcend the context in which a written document was produced. Overreliance on calibrated holistic scores can presume, like machine-essay-scoring, that individual student writing is effectively represented through a quantified categorization. This is why utilizing writing assessment to justify curricular changes or developments can be problematic—not all practices can be shown to be effective through statistical measures, which, of course, raises all sorts of questions about reliability of human judgment and evaluation. This program profile will leave most of those questions for another time; the objective of our narrative is to show how a thoughtful curriculum change was supported by a local assessment that justified the change to others on campus.

Background and Institutional Context

Murray State University is a public comprehensive university in Murray, Kentucky with an enrollment of just over 10,000 students. As one of Kentucky's regional universities, it serves the mostly rural population of far western Kentucky and nearby portions of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Tennessee. Murray State has received recognition for being a good value and has consistently been listed among the top 25 public comprehensive universities in the South. Incoming students each Fall number close to 1,100, and with a 25-student cap on the university's required (revised) first-year composition course, 40-45 sections are offered each Fall. Of note is that Murray State does not have a campus-wide writing program. The curriculum of first-year composition and scheduling of part-time instructors, along with other administrative tasks, are the responsibility of the Composition Coordinator, a faculty member in the Department of English and Philosophy. The Coordinator is assisted by a composition committee, which he/she chairs. Developmental writing is taught in a separate office on campus, led by a Basic Writing Coordinator, who also contributes writing assistance to a learning center by training undergraduate writing tutors. A writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program was brought back to life in 2010, with the appointment of a WAC Coordinator. Also in 2010, a writing center opened, directed by a faculty member in the Department of English and Philosophy and staffed by trained graduate students or advanced undergraduate

students. Thus, although most of the elements of a program are in place, the work is divided among four coordinators who work together sporadically without a real unifying structure. Eventually, we trust this situation will change; we provide this information here to help contextualize the steps we have taken with FYC to perhaps enable those changes.

In the summer of 2008, before the WAC and Writing Center coordinators were appointed, Paul was appointed the Composition Coordinator. Paul's curricular responsibilities included ENG 101: Composition, and ENG 102: Composition and Research. At the time, ENG 101 required three papers that generally covered narrative, analysis, and basic argument, and ENG 102 followed with emphasis on analysis, research, and multiple-sourced argumentative papers. The focus on academic inquiry in the second semester worked effectively as a scaffold for developing academic writing, but as the revision was being designed and implemented, that two-semester timeframe did not seem to be a necessity for student success. A well-designed program, focused more intensively on inquiry, might provide effective writing development in one semester. Importantly, Paul didn't come into the position with the intent to change the curriculum, but during an impromptu meeting with the dean of the College of Fine Arts and Humanities, the one-semester idea arose from a sit-down discussion about possible changes to address two issues. First, some faculty members in the Department of English and Philosophy had expressed interest in "writing seminar" versions of FYC that were conducive to their respective specialties. The other issue concerned the number of FYC sections taught by part-time instructors, which did not align with MLA or NCTE recommendations. During this meeting, we broached the idea to revise the FYC structure from a 6-credit-hour, two-semester sequence to a 4-credit-hour, one semester course and agreed to begin the process.

Administratively, the key to this revision was that the 4-credit-hour course would count as two courses for English faculty loads (normally 4/4), making it more appealing for full-time faculty in rotation to teach it, with the understanding that enhanced individualized writing instruction would be enabled by the extra two credit hours of unassigned time. In the new one-semester course, full-time faculty could design the course with attention to theme and specialty, accomplishing the common objectives and outcomes without worrying whether the material would cohere with the second-semester course. The other key was to front-load FYC sections in the Fall to allow students to complete the requirement and enroll in courses where FYC is a prerequisite in the Spring. Under our plan, with full-time faculty teaching more sections than obligated to, and fewer sections needing to be offered in the Spring semester, money typically used to pay part-time instructors in the Spring would be saved to provide "seed money" for eventually transitioning those instructors into full-time lecturers. This goal arose out of the concern (provoked by various outside statements on course load and conditions for contingent faculty) [\[1\] \[#note1\]](#) that too many of our sections were taught by adjuncts, preventing the impetus for improving the conditions for those adjuncts. We recognize that the department's and university's mutual investment in full-time faculty positions is beneficial to students because of the permanence of the position. No matter how willing part-time instructors are to improve teaching practice, conduct teacher or other research, and participate fully in departmental and university service and programs, the incentives and rewards for doing so are limited if nonexistent.

At the time, a university committee was revising the University Studies, or general education, requirements, and a major-specific, writing-intensive requirement was being considered. If a revision of FYC was going to happen, the ideal time was during this gen ed revision period. Shortly thereafter, with approval from the chair of the department of English and Philosophy, the proposal was presented to the department and various university committees until it was approved for the new university catalog for Fall 2009. To state the process succinctly hides the amount of work in developing the proposal and defending it among several groups of university faculty. As the readers of this journal might suspect, the proposal met with some opposition, though not from within the English and Philosophy Department. The opportunity to teach one less course (even though ENG 105 is not a full

course release) and the increased flexibility in meeting the common objectives appealed to English faculty. The opposition came from elsewhere. For the University Studies committee, the proposal was brought forward late in the process of revising the general education requirements, which meant that the nearly approved revision now would be short two credit hours. This concerned several programs because they had been insisting on a broad general education program and had resisted reducing the number of hours required. Other programs thought it beneficial because they already felt limited in what they could require of their majors with a broad general education program and the state-imposed 120-hour requirement for any Bachelor’s degree. Eventually, these concerns were worked out without any change—the general education requirements were adjusted to fit the reduced FYC credit hours.

Rationale for the Curricular Revision

The most vehement opposition to the course revision came in various forms of the same sentiment: “Our students don’t know how to write; we should be requiring more writing, not less.” A few faculty members expressed concern that students would no longer be required to take two semesters of composition prior to taking other classes. We did not ignore this concern, for we acknowledge the importance of writing instruction. However, we felt that our revision was equal in rigor and content to the two courses, no matter what the credit hours indicated. Also, the concerns of other faculty in this regard seemed based on what Joseph Petraglia has called general writing skills instruction (GWSI), which our field has tended theoretically to resist, from the rise of “writing to learn,” to WAC/WID, to the post-process understanding of writing’s complexity and situatedness. The preparatory function of FYC presumes that writing skills can be taught generally, and that such skills must be taught early on for students to write effectively later on in their “more important” major courses. One problem with these presumptions, as we know, is that GWSI dismisses the complicated and heterogeneous contextual factors involved in writing. Challenging the need to teach once-and-for-all general writing skills in the first year is the largest obstacle our discipline faces in any generation, because arguments against GWSI are esoterically theoretical and counter the general-skills approach common in other “introduction-to-the-discipline” courses. Yet the concern that students must have preparatory writing instruction overlooks two realities of university students: 1) students enroll in general education courses that often require writing concurrently with FYC; 2) due to transfer policies, program requirements, and human tendencies, a significant number of students enrolled in ENG 101 and 102 after their first year. Many seniors, in fact, have historically enrolled in ENG 102 in their last semester, somehow fulfilling all other requirements without this supposedly “preparatory” course. Our revised ENG 105, while not completely averse to such issues, makes it much more difficult for students to attain sophomore status without completing the course.

Therefore, our response to this concern was to assure members of the faculty that the new 4-credit-hour course would not only “prepare” students for academic writing and thinking during their first year, but it would also at least match the rigor of its two-course predecessor. Our assurance was based on three “marketable” notions:

- More full-time faculty interested in and actually teaching composition would enhance the students’ contextual understanding of and performance in academic writing.
- A comprehensive, intensive writing course in one semester would keep the connections between writing skills and academic inquiry fresh on their minds without a break between an introductory 101 course and a research-focused 102 course.
- Further writing instruction and practice would take place within students’ major programs with the implementation of designated Writing Intensive courses required for every major.

The third notion, which was already decided by the University Studies committee, we recognize as an adequate, though not ideal, application of WAC and WID research. Since our idea for this revision, as well as the benefits for students and part-time instructors, stemmed from the recommendations of the NCTE and WPA Council on the use of contingent faculty in the composition classroom,^{2} [\[#note2\]](#) our original intention was for this plan to not only invigorate our instruction, but to also enable our adjuncts to apply for soon-to-be-added full-time lecturer positions. Because of budget reduction factors common to most public universities around the country during the last few years, we have been unable to offer these lecturer positions yet, but our full-time faculty representation in the composition classrooms has indeed increased. In fact, the course revision has made the teaching of composition a priority for faculty in our department—they are choosing to teach FYC rather than accepting it as their obligation.

The revised course, pedagogically and theoretically, emphasizes critical reading, writing, and inquiry. The revision committee looked closely at the WPA Outcomes Statement,^{3} [\[#note3\]](#) making minor adjustments to ENG 105’s objectives to match the document’s language and intent more closely. The finished revision (see [Appendix 1 \[murray-state-appendices.php#appx1\]](#) for details and comparison of the old and new curriculum) is essentially an expanded ENG 102 course, with additional early writing assignments building toward researched argument papers. Most instructors now design the readings, writing assignments, and classroom activities with acknowledgement of the complexity of writing, or the varied situations and contexts from which writing emerges and to which it responds. Many instructors also choose to design a seminar-type semester with an overriding theme. Examples have included environmentalism, friendship, consumerism, law, veteran issues, globalization, and multiculturalism. With *inquiry* as a part of the course title, students are reminded of the necessity to ask questions of theme-based or other texts, discovering answers through research and writing, and are encouraged to delve deeper into topics through the focused and nuanced study of ideas. Practically, the coherence of the assignments in only one semester has been an important element in the course’s success among faculty and students. Meeting frequently and for longer each week seems to enable more connection among assignments, allowing for revision, further development of ideas, and inclusive skill-building without a complete change of classroom dynamic as happened with a two-semester sequence.

Rationale for the Curricular Assessment

The enthusiasm and commitment shown by the faculty to the revised curriculum have been adequate evidence that the changes invigorated the teaching of FYC, but such intangible measures are less persuasive to some audiences. Therefore, the purposes of this study included justifying our curriculum change to our own campus colleagues, while recognizing that the results may be beneficial to the field of composition at large. To our knowledge, there are no studies directly comparing two-semester FYC sequences with one-semester FYC courses. We were able to point to other institutions that have 4-credit-hour FYC courses, but we weren’t able to locate any research that stated whether there was any difference in student performance. The dearth of research is expected, we suppose, as writing programs should be contextually designed, and the needs of different universities vary. For example, many universities recruit graduate students by providing funding through teaching FYC; Murray State funds only a few graduate teaching assistants per year, which requires many other sections to be staffed in other ways. Some schools don’t have any graduate students, and so both historical practice and institutional needs determine how FYC is structured in any context. Therefore, to compare across institutional contexts could set up false ideals that may cause problems when applied elsewhere. We were confident that our revision would address the needs at Murray State; and while the impetus for our comparative assessment was local in nature, stemming from the opposition to our course revision from outside the department, we recognize from our own experience that such research should be valuable to others in composition studies.

At the beginning of Fall 2009, with the debut of ENG 105, we were prepared to assess student writing that emerged from the course as a condition for going through with the revision of FYC. If, after one year, we found a significant decline in the quality of student writing from the 4-credit-hour course compared to the 6-hour sequence, then we would reevaluate the revision, make adjustments, and assess again after three years. If at that point, the quality of student writing in the 4-credit-hour course remained significantly lower than the student writing from the 6-hour sequence, then we would return to that model. Because of that promise, we developed an assessment plan and carried it out, as described in the next two sections.

Assessment Methods

Elizabeth, a senior at Murray State majoring in history and English education, led the data collection (of final student papers submitted in ENG 102 and 105) under Paul's direction. She developed a permission waiver with assistance from the IRB, which was signed by the majority of ENG 105 students, who understood that their participation would not affect their course grade. The forms were distributed to approximately 40 sections of ENG 105 classes and around 10 ENG 102 sections (102 sections that were retained for students who enrolled under the jurisdiction of the old catalog). These forms were not necessary for the primary comparative purpose of the assessment, but in the event that the content of the papers might be used, we wanted permission to do so. Because past collection of ENG 102 final papers was strictly for programmatic assessment purposes, we did not have permission forms for past ENG 102 students, making those papers off limits under IRB rules if passages are excerpted.

After we collected the permission forms and categorized them by section number and instructor, we requested that each course instructor provide the students with an e-mail address utilized specifically for storage of the papers. At the end of the semester, all ENG 105 and ENG 102 instructors were asked to have their classes submit their final papers to this e-mail address. For several years the final paper in ENG 102 has been a researched-argument assignment of at least eight pages in length, and this served as a pattern for ENG 105's final paper. Because of this, we were able to compare papers with similar aims and structure and that served, in the case of each class, as the culminating assignment for the semester.

Upon receiving the papers, we downloaded the approximately 300 student papers to a removable drive and numbered them. We used a random number generator to select two sets of 75 samples from the ENG 105 group (we had more usable 105 papers, and one set would be used for another institutional use). From the past collection of ENG 102 papers, and the recently received ENG 102 papers, we randomly selected one set of 75 papers. After the student papers were selected, we printed the papers and eliminated any identifying information for the students by first whitening out their names and section number, as well as marking over them with a black sharpie to ensure total anonymity.

Over the course of several months, a holistic scoring team, formed in conjunction with a university-wide effort to enhance written communication for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation, developed a six-point scoring guide (see [Appendix 2 \[murray-state-appendices.php#appx2\]](#)) to evaluate student papers and calibrated their scoring of sample papers accordingly. The team consisted of around 10 instructors of required composition and humanities courses, and the scoring guide reflected general writing attributes but was particular to elements that work in English studies, though not aligned explicitly to either ENG 102 or ENG 105 objectives. At the end of the 2009 Spring semester, the team spent one week evaluating the composition papers using the scoring guide. As typical for this type of calibrated scoring, each paper was evaluated by two readers. If there was more than one point between the evaluator's scores, a third reader evaluated the paper.

As is understood in our field, writing quality is a heterogeneous variable—there are several competing elements in its make-up. If writing assessment intends that results culminate in a single score, then weighting of variables is easily manipulated, adjusted, or altered (Gladwell). Weighting of variables is always subjective. In writing assessment, even the most carefully calibrated, multi-reader holistic scoring cannot reduce internal weighting of elements by individual scorers. The calibration merely elicits *that group’s* collective weighting of a rubric’s elements relative to a numerical scale. This understanding made us careful in our use of holistic scoring to compare students’ writing samples. Since we were not attempting to extend the student scores beyond the study, we felt that we did not overreach, claiming to accurately measure the individual students’ overall writing ability. The paper scores simply represented a scoring group’s assessment of each paper at that specific time, outside the classroom context but still within the context of a composition program. From that programmatic perspective, the results avoid, importantly, assessing the methods of individual teachers of the composition courses.

Assessment Results

In Table 1, the results of the assessment are shown. As indicated in the table, the assessment included more papers from ENG 105 than ENG 102. The reason for this was that the ENG 105 papers were also being used in another assessment project in conjunction with the SACS Quality Enhancement Plan. However, to avoid picking and choosing among the 150 papers to compare with the 75 ENG 102 papers, we believe comparing the mean of the 150 papers is more honest than using half of them. The holistic scorers did not at any time know which paper was for either class, nor did they know the specific assessment purpose of the papers they would be evaluating. The most elementary comparison is between means, shown in Table 1; the ENG 102 papers show a slightly higher, though statistically insignificant, mean (3.23) than all of the ENG 105 papers (3.05). The average score of 3 for all papers, on a scale of 6 points, indicates an expected performance range of first-year writing students, though over time we hope for an average in the 4 range.

Course	ENG 102 (n=75)	ENG 105 (n=150)
Mean	3.23	3.05

Table 1: Average scores for course papers (on a 6-point scale)

Enhancing the Foundation for Writing Instruction

The results of our assessment confirm that our efforts to revise our FYC course to better fit the situation of our university were successful – our planning and implementation maintained the level of student writing ability through a one-semester course. We feel we are moving in the direction of meeting the best practices of writing programs, despite the chance that other realities, most likely financial, might in the future undermine our efforts to increase the number of full-time faculty in the composition classroom. In addition to the quantifiable comparison of the student writing, the revision of the course produced a few qualitative results as well, which we hope will help to maintain the overall quality of writing instruction at our institution. These results include increased cooperation between the coordinators of composition and basic writing; a starting point for developing a culture of writing across campus; and an increased interest in and enthusiasm for teaching writing by faculty members.

As mentioned earlier, Murray State lacks a WPA; instead, the work is currently divided among four coordinators, one of whom is a tenured faculty, two of whom are tenure-track, and one of whom is non-tenure-track. The revision of FYC enabled stronger collaboration between the composition

coordinator and the basic writing coordinator, as the change to ENG 105 affected when students placed into the developmental writing courses would be able to enroll, as well as the preparation required. The one semester course covers topics and skills quickly; most classes meet four days each week, and students produce a lot of informal and formal writing. The need for support for struggling writers not technically classified as basic writers has been integral to the collaboration between the two coordinators. Now that a writing center has been established, the support for students in FYC continues to grow. With the resurgence of a WAC program at Murray State in 2010, students and teachers outside FYC are recognizing the importance of writing in learning and teaching. By initiating this revision and the discussions that followed, the composition program claims some credit for the increased "culture" of writing on campus. The catalyst for most of the recent developments has been SACS accreditation requirements, but by proposing the revision to FYC, defending it, and promising to assess its effectiveness, issues of writing were foregrounded on campus before the WAC program was implemented, preparing the ground, so to speak, for the valuable theories of writing to disseminate beyond the English department. Paul has had several opportunities in hallways and stairwells to casually share the philosophy behind the ENG 105 revision with fellow faculty members, and many of these conversations have carried into subsequent discussions of criteria for writing intensive courses. The WAC coordinator shares our emphasis on the role of academic inquiry in writing instruction, which is evident in the new WAC program as "writing ambassadors" from each college address writing issues from cross-disciplinary perspectives.

Within the Department of English and Philosophy, the course revision has caused more faculty members to be involved in professional development and orientation sessions. One course that covers what two courses covered previously has simplified hiring of adjunct instructors, placement testing, and the glut of students trying to enroll in full sections of 101 or 102 in the Fall or Spring semester. Further, composition teacher orientation sessions are slightly more focused because everyone is teaching the same course, which increases the applicability of specific professional development meetings during the semester. The workshops on writing involve most of the faculty members in the department, including philosophy faculty, who are not "credentialed" under accreditation rules to teach English courses. Those who have participated enjoy discussing writing instruction and evaluation, and other issues of writing not unique in any way to English studies. Additionally, the new WAC program has extended these discussions on writing even further across campus.

Furthermore, the revision has increased enthusiasm within the department for teaching composition, not only because of the course-release equivalency, but also because the department was and continues to be involved in ongoing discussions and professional development regarding writing on campus. It's not that they weren't interested in writing before; the revision and subsequent writing-related developments have awakened to a larger degree faculty's interest and intellectual effort in teaching writing. This is evident from voluntary attendance at professional development programs, volunteers for the composition committee and subcommittees, and the lack of complaints about teaching composition. In fact, an unanticipated problem that has occurred is full-time faculty are asking to teach composition, which has caused administrative difficulties in offering and staffing other department courses.

Where We Will Go From Here

A concerted, thoughtful effort in any curriculum will likely show some measure of success, and since this revision reflects the best model for the context in which writing is taught at Murray State, we believe that the comparison assessment confirms to our university colleagues that our efforts have been rightly placed. We recognize that much more can be done to increase our ability to facilitate writing improvement in our students, including, though not limited to, effective assessment of students meeting course objectives and outcomes. Influenced by the Dynamic Criteria Mapping of

writing qualities pioneered by Bob Broad, we are examining the newly released Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing^{4} [\[#note4\]](#) for ideas on understanding student “habits of mind” as they relate to what teachers value in student writing. Teacher accountability is a politically charged phrase, and we are uncomfortable with many of the intentions behind such efforts. One of the principles that we hold in our composition program is that teachers perform best when allowed to do what they do best. Aside from broadly described common objectives, teachers of FYC at Murray State are free to design their courses to best fit their own interests and specialties. Instructors are not left alone, however; guidance and suggestions are always available, in addition to regular professional development workshops and a pre-semester orientation session.

The autonomy we provide reflects our belief that teachers’ understanding of the classroom context should be valued and thus protected against overbearing outside efforts to measure accountability or student performance. Because of that belief, our current and future assessments of student performance and teacher effectiveness rely heavily on individual teacher impressions of their own students’ accomplishment of course outcomes—acknowledging the importance of in-context assessment of learning. As alluded to previously, the study described in this article was useful for the specific purpose of confirming our department’s specialty in first-year writing instruction to our colleagues. The assumption that such a confirmation is necessary is troubling, and to avoid the impression that we will continue to conduct similar assessments, we are purposefully assessing our curriculum by relying on individual teacher impressions of their own students’ collective work. Basically, we ask each instructor to participate in this assessment two times during the semester by responding to an online questionnaire after completing the grading of a set of their students’ papers (see questionnaire in [Appendix 3 \[murray-state-appendices.php#appx3\]](#)). The questionnaire asks the teacher to rate on a scale whether his/her students are competent in each of the course objectives. The results show which objectives students are struggling with the most, and thus we can develop workshops for teachers to address these struggles. In this way, the assessment of student performance is able to immediately enhance the curriculum, rather than us trying to interpret quantified, holistic scores of a sample of student papers and to understand which of the holistic-rubric categories affected the students’ overall scores. We also think that involving instructors in the assessment builds their instructional expertise as they reflect on the collective performance of their students—a benefit that is more often limited to holistic scoring teams rather than all instructors.

At this point in our writing program’s progression, our comparative study confirms the foundational structure of writing instruction at Murray State University as we move forward in all our efforts to enhance our program. We recognize that there are additional ways to increase instructional expertise and student learning, including reducing our course caps in FYC courses, and we hope to address such enhancements as we do our part to contribute to a stronger culture of writing across campus.

Appendices

Because of their length, appendices are available on a [separate web page \[murray-state-appendices.php\]](#) (see links below) and [as a PDF document. \[murray-state-appendices.pdf\]](#)

1. [Appendix 1: Description of Former Two-Course Sequence \(ENG 101/102\) and Revised Course \(ENG 105\) \[murray-state-appendices.php#appx1\]](#)
2. [Appendix 2: Holistic Scoring Guide \[murray-state-appendices.php#appx2\]](#)
3. [Appendix 3: New Assessment Questionnaire \[murray-state-appendices.php#appx3\]](#)

Notes

1. We were most influenced by statements on contingent faculty conditions from the AAUP and MLA. These statements respond to the decline in tenure-track positions and the concern that universities are exploiting part-time faculty without providing adequate professional conditions for teaching. For further information, see the AAUP statement on "Contingent Appointments and the Academic Profession" (<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/conting-stmt.htm> [<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/conting-stmt.htm>]) and the MLA "Statement on Non-Tenure Track Faculty Members" (http://www.mla.org/statement_on_nonten [http://www.mla.org/statement_on_nonten]). ([Return to text. \[#note1-ref\]](#))
2. See the NCTE "Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty" (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/contingent_faculty [http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/contingent_faculty]) and "Part-time Faculty in English Composition: A WPA Survey" (<http://wpacouncil.org/archives/05n1/05n1mcclelland.pdf> [<http://wpacouncil.org/archives/05n1/05n1mcclelland.pdf>]). ([Return to text. \[#note2-ref\]](#))
3. See the Council of Writing Program Administrators' "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition": <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html> [<http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>]. ([Return to text. \[#note3-ref\]](#))
4. See the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (with NCTE and National Writing Project) "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing": <http://wpacouncil.org/framework> [<http://wpacouncil.org/framework>]. ([Return to text. \[#note4-ref\]](#))

Works Cited

AAUP. "Contingent Appointments and the Academic Profession." November 2003. Web. 31 May 2011.

Broad, Bob. *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2003. Print.

CCCC Committee on Assessment. "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement." November 2006 (Revised March 2009). Conference on College Composition and Communication. Web. 30 April 2011.

Ericsson, Patricia Freitag, and Richard H. Haswell. *Machine Scoring of Student Essays: Truth and Consequences*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2006. Print.

Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Order of Things." *The New Yorker* 14 Feb. 2011: 68-75. Print.

MLA. "Statement on Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members." December 2003. Web. 31 May 2011.

NCTE-WPA. White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities. 2008. Web. 30 April 2011.

O'Neill, Peggy, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot. *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2009. Print.

Petraglia, Joseph ed. *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995. Print.

Williamson, Michael M., and Brian A. Huot. *Validating Holistic Scoring for Writing Assessment: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993. Print.

WPA. Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition. 2008. Web. 11 May 2011.

WPA-NCTE-NWP. Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing. 2011. Web. 7 May 2011.

"Utilizing Strategic Assessment to Support FYC Curricular Revision" from *Composition Forum 24* (Fall 2011)

Online at: <http://compositionforum.com/issue/24/murray-state.php>

© Copyright 2011 Paul Walker and Elizabeth Myers.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License](#). [</editorial-policy.php#license>]



[\[http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum\]](http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum)