



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

SETTING THE BAR: CREATING A DEPARTMENTAL EXAM FOR FRESHMEN COMPOSITION

Like many community colleges, Temple College relies on adjunct instructors at its main campus, two off-site centers, and numerous area high schools. As a new Communications Department Chair, I was responsible for supervising nine full-time faculty and 23 adjuncts teaching a variety of English courses. I became alarmed at the variation in the ways freshmen composition was being structured by both full- and part-time instructors. Some instructors focused on writing skills, others on grammar, and still others on linguistics. Time had come for the department to standardize. Luckily, a core of full-time English faculty were advocating syllabus, course, and exam standardization. And, the national movement toward assessment of student learning helped strengthen the cause. We began what became a year-long process.

The Departmental Syllabus

Full-time English faculty began by reviewing and revising the departmental freshmen composition syllabus. My primary role was as facilitator. The department focused on what students were expected to be able to do by the end of the course, regardless of instructor. Faculty discussed issues such as weight of grammar work and writing assignments, and listed required grammar topics and writing styles. Agreements were reached about required number and types of major essays. After two months of intensive work, the department reached consensus and agreed upon a departmental syllabus. We had created a document that we could hand to a new full-time or adjunct instructor; the guidelines were specific enough to be aligned with the department, yet flexible enough to allow for instructor individuality. We were on our way to our departmental final exam!

Requiring a Grammar Pre-/Post-test

Although the department's primary goal was to develop the final exam, faculty included a grammar pre-/post-test in hopes that all instructors would address

grammatical concepts. Two faculty members volunteered to create test drafts. For security purposes, we agreed that I would maintain test sets and faculty would "check out" and return these sets as needed. As part of our new syllabus, we included a note that instructors should see the department chair to obtain copies of the grammar tests. With our revised focus on standardization and assessment, faculty recognized that the department needed to set a benchmark and decided to use data from the first administration period to determine an appropriate score.

Developing the Essay Assessment Instrument

We began work on the most important assessment instrument for our departmental final—the essay exam, which required the development of an essay-scoring rubric. We researched community college programs that utilized rubrics, were able to develop our own, and named our instrument, "The Essay Assessment." We included categories of organization, coherence, unity, fluency, and sentence skills; and added a category for following directions. We assigned numerical weight values of 1 to 5 for each category and decided that for the first administration, we would focus on sentence skills, expecting 70% of our students to score at least a 3.

Final Exam Topic Preparation

Next, we began work on developing essay exam topics. Faculty members contributed a variety of topics. After several meetings, we selected about 30 topics which would be set aside for the creation of final exam essay prompt variations. Faculty agreed that these 30 topics would not be assigned during the regular semester so that no class or student would have an unfair advantage.

Orientation and Calibration Sessions

Once we fine-tuned the instrument, it was time to orient adjuncts before the spring semester began. We knew that adjunct faculty needed to know the history and rationale for the departmental syllabus and exam, and that they needed to become familiar with the essay assessment because they were to use this instrument for all major essays throughout the semester.

Several weeks into the spring semester, we held



calibration sessions. Full-time faculty word-processed previously written and graded student essays, omitting names of students. Some samples were persuasive, others comparison, still others expository and narrative. Some had been awarded high marks, others low. Full-time faculty participated in these sessions as they explained to adjuncts why and how the department was implementing a departmental final. Adjuncts were not only appreciative of the opportunity to interact with full-time faculty, but they helped add topics to our list.

The calibration sessions went well. Faculty members were amazed at the similarities among the scoring results. We began, as a group, grading a sample essay, sharing results, and discussing scores. After a few grading rounds with the same essay, we grouped ourselves into pairs, with each pair grading the same essay. Rarely did we find differences of more than five points. Our scoring plan included a procedure for having a third reader score an essay which had more than a letter-grade spread.

Procedures for the Grading Plan

We wanted a blind grading process. In our plan, instructors would not grade their own students' final exam essays; furthermore, students would not include their names on the exam, but rather their ID numbers. We hoped to eliminate any chance of biased or preferential grading.

We created a score sheet that was to be stapled to the prompt sheet. This score sheet included two half-sized copies of our essay assessment grid (to allow for the two graders); a place for students to write their ID number; and places for faculty to write the scores.

Last-Minute Preparations

I coordinated the administration of the exam, as well as created 12 versions of the prompt sheet, including three topic choices on each. Because the final exam period extended over several days, we created alternate test versions, preparing sets for the different days of the week, for evening classes, for online classes, and for make-up tests. With the help of a student assistant and a couple of faculty members, I determined when each instructor was scheduled to give the exam, where the test was to be administered, and the number of students in each class. A spreadsheet was prepared to include date and time, instructor's name, room assignment, and number of students. Moreover, I made the exam copies, according to the spreadsheet numbers and dates. Packets were made and delivered the day before for off-site instructors, with instructions that envelopes not be opened until the scheduled exam period began.

Implementing the Departmental Exam

Before each exam session, I delivered the exam envelopes with instructions to return the ungraded exams to me. As soon as I received a packet, I delivered it to another instructor—thus, each essay was scored by two different instructors. Then all packets were returned to me. I calculated the final grade, based on the scores of the two graders, and returned exams to the respective faculty who matched student ID numbers with names.

Reflections

English faculty feel more unified, knowing that all freshman composition students are getting the same information, regardless of instructor. Assessment issues are beginning to be addressed. We have grammar pre-/post-test benchmarks, data about students' sentence skills, and conversations about improving the curriculum and sharing teaching strategies.

Collaboration was required throughout this process. The final results belonged to the department. Collegiality improved—some full-time faculty members observed that some of the part-time instructors were “very easy to work with” or “extremely knowledgeable.” Some part-time faculty members began thinking about full-time teaching after this experience.

The process is not perfect, but this first implementation has improved the quality of education for composition students and benefited both full- and part-time faculty, as well.

Susan Guzmán-Treviño, Doctoral Student, Community College Leadership Program

For further information, contact the author at The University of Texas, 1 University Station D5600, Austin, TX 78712-0378. e-mail: sguzman@templejc.edu

