

Chapter VIII

Effects of Assessment Results on a Writing and Thinking Rubric

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ABSTRACT

The development of the Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment online system is described in this chapter. Beginning with needs identified in a learning community program, the system evolved from a classroom analytic writing and thinking assessment rubric to an online system for classroom assessment and instructional purposes. Reflecting the assessment cycle, the system is equally appropriate for program or institutional assessment of student learning. Over a period of twelve years, assessment, survey, and research data guided changes and additions to the rubric and system. Preliminary data suggest using the system for peer review improves students' writing and thinking.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how an online writing and thinking assessment system developed from assessment data and instructional needs. Data that affected its evolution and components are addressed.

Initiated over ten years ago in response to needs identified in a two-year, team-taught learning community program at the University of South

Florida, the Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment (CLAQWA) rubric has evolved into an online assessment system. In USF's learning community program, faculty from multiple disciplines team-taught cohorts of fifty students; all faculty graded writing, although with considerable variation. The program coordinator, who is also a faculty member of the English department, and I (the program evaluator) discovered through interviews and surveys that grading differed

widely among faculty. This reality frustrated students. Also, through observations, we realized that faculty fostered higher-order, complex thinking, reflecting the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives—Cognitive Domain (1956) even during the first year of the two-year curriculum. Responding to these two findings, we recognized the need to provide a consistent method to evaluate writing for faculty from diverse disciplines and to provide evidence of students' thinking levels. Because writing was an emphasis in the learning community, we decided to evaluate thinking through student essays. We reviewed existing performance-based measures, but did not find any that fulfilled our basic requirements: applicability for faculty in diverse disciplines and the ability to assess cognitive levels in students' written work. Thus, we began the development of CLAQWA, a two-part assessment tool including a writing rubric and a cognitive scale, to be used separately or in combination.

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF FINDINGS

Based upon commonly used writing handbooks, such as *St. Martin's Handbook*, *Harbrace College Handbook*, and *Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers*, the initial writing rubric was a five-point analytic scale with levels one, three, and five defined. Several factors influenced the decision to develop an analytic scale, in which individual components are judged separately, rather than a holistic scale in which a paper is assigned a single score. An analytic scale provides both a common set of criteria faculty could use to guide their evaluation of students' writing and flexibility to select from the criteria. Furthermore, White (1998), a composition theorist and early proponent of holistic scoring, cautioned that while judgments can be made holistically (choosing one level as a representation of all criteria), faculty

must teach analytically. While giving a grade represents a holistic perception, feedback about the specific criteria used to make the holistic judgment provides students with the information necessary to improve. Also, through conversations with the learning community faculty, including composition instructors, they revealed that students often are better with some components of writing than others.

Although based upon writing handbooks, the categories also were affected by assessment results as the rubric was initially used. For example, the components that comprised the original category of "Organization and Development" were divided into two separate categories: one pertaining to structure and the other reflecting reasoning and evidence supplied. We observed that while many beginning students' essays had an appealing structure (five paragraph essays which students learned to produce for standardized testing), the quality of content and the reasoning demonstrated in the essays were often weak. These results were used to refine the rubric and more clearly reflect writing traits we hoped to foster.

When searching for the foundation for the thinking portion of the two-part scale, we chose Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives-Cognitive Domain (1956). In addition to its accessibility, the six-level taxonomy reflects thinking faculty typically advocate, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Moreover, several authors have recommended using Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives-Cognitive Domain (1956) to assess writing. In 1983, Spear advocated the use of Bloom and his colleagues' work for writing evaluation, and Olson (1992) developed a writing curriculum around Bloom's cognitive levels. In 1997, Steele, in his rationale for the development of American College Testing's Critical Thinking Assessment Battery (which requires writing), stated that "Bloom's Taxonomy remains useful as a means of analyzing and classifying the levels of intellectual demands in cognitive activities" (p. 19). We, in fact, based our scale on the later work

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