

CASSL Innovation Grant  
Writing Sample Assessment  
Spring 2011

Submitted by Lisa Dominguez Abraham  
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**Participants:**

Lisa Dominguez Abraham (coordinator); English faculty: Lesley Gale, Norman Hom, Catherine Hooper, Heather Hutcheson and David Weinshilboum; ESL faculty: Rhonda Farley and Marlo McClurg-McKinnon; Student assistant: Stephanie Young

**Project Goal:**

Students assess into CRC English classes via a multiple-choice test (the CTEP). Unfortunately, many of these students are under-prepared. Therefore, during the 2010-11 school year, I used two consecutive Type B sabbaticals to research both the desirability and feasibility of adding a writing sample component to our assessment process. The information generated by this study will help the CRC English department decide how to move forward with our own assessment instruments and with test portability between our sister campuses.

A key piece to this study was to compare students' suggested course placements via a writing sample test to their suggested placements via the CTEP. In order to do this, writing sample tests had to be scored by qualified readers using a validated process. The CASSL grant made it possible for CRC composition course-level coordinators to participate in an all-day norming and scoring session on January 28, 2011. It also provided funds for a student aide to help record the volumes of data generated by the reading.

**Methods:**

During the first week of the semester, before receiving any instruction, composition students took the same writing sample assessment test that is used at SCC. The papers were not identified with course or student names. Instead, each was coded with a course section number and a student ID number.

Brad Brazil then compiled a master list organized only by student ID number and said we would need a minimum of 256 papers in order to have a valid sample for the study. I used this list to pull from each class set the papers of students who had taken the CTEP between March 2010 and January 2011, whittling the original stack of approximately 1,300 papers down to 400.

On January 28, the English faculty participants helped pull from the pool of 400 only those students who were currently enrolled in the course into which they had been placed via the CTEP. We felt these were the students least likely to have taken a previous college-level English course that might have affected their abilities as measured by these two tests. We ended up with over 300 papers. Due to time constraints, we read and scored 299, still well over the number we needed.

Before the official reading began, we conducted a norming session in order to ensure we were consistently identifying the markers of entry-level writing for each course level. Norming sessions are described in the original application for this grant.

During the official reading, we followed this process:

- Each reader put his/her score and initials on a paper, then covered the score with a removable dot.
- The second reader scored the paper “blind.” Only after the second reader had written a score did he/ she remove the dot to see whether the two scores matched.
- Because each score represented a particular course level, if the two scores were the same, the paper was considered done.
- If the scores were a point apart (for instance, a 3 and a 4), the paper went to a third reader. Sometimes at this point, the readers also got together to once again discuss the standards.
- As an aside, upon analyzing the sets of scores, Jeanne Edman was impressed by how few third-reads were necessary. She says it suggests that holistic scoring is consistent.

At SCC, if the readers for the English department feel that a paper has significant ESL markers, that student is advised to take the ESL writing sample test. Rhonda Farley and Marlo McClurg-McKinnon read the 13 papers that were identified as having significant ESL markers. They suggested an appropriate ESL course for 12 of these papers. One paper out of the 13 was identified by them as more likely being the writing of someone with a learning disability.

### Results Summary:

At the time of this report, we are still waiting for final semester grades to be added to our information in order to make reasonable comparisons between the writing sample test and CTEP. However, a survey conducted later in the semester offers some initial insights into the results of the scoring session.

After midterms, I distributed a teacher perception survey, asking teachers to fill out the following three pieces of information only for those students whose papers were read on January 28.

<u>Midterm Grade</u>	<u>Placement Perception</u> (1= Should be at lower-level, 2=Placed appropriately, 3= Should be at higher-level)	Has the student Dropped? (Y/N)
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Because most teachers only had a few students whose papers were part of the study, the survey took little time; the response was therefore timely and thorough.

(In fact, it went beyond thorough. Several teachers spontaneously wrote comments about the number of students they felt would be better served by an ESL class. I wasn't sure how to record these comments, so I turned to Jeanne Edman. She suggested doing a follow-up survey to address this particular concern. The results will be included in my sabbatical report.)

I gave the data from the above survey to Jeanne Edman, and she analyzed it along with the results of the writing sample scoring session. What follows is an excerpt from a letter I sent to English faculty on May 10, 2011:

#### Overall

When looking at the entire pool of papers in the study, we found that writing sample scores correlate with midterm grades in a statistically significant way. However, if one breaks down the results by course level, it predicts the accuracy of

- 101 placements *very well*
- 41, 51, 300 placements—poorly

Here are my initial theories as to why this may be true:

#### In terms of 101

The prompt we used for the study is similar to the types of prompts used for the ENGWR 51 department final, essentially a single sentence that asks students to communicate their own experiences. For this study it was “Describe an important life lesson you have learned.” Students’ ability to construct an organized, clearly written response to a prompt of this type indicates whether they are ready to tackle writing at the ENGWR 101 level.

It’s possibly also true that ENGWR 101 midterm grades are strongly linked to the students’ essay grades, rather than their attendance, homework, in-class work, quizzes, etc. Therefore, it makes sense that their ability as measured by the writing sample reflects their ability do well in class.

#### In terms of 41 and 51

Because both of these courses work on preparing students to write essays, by the middle of the semester, students may have been working on sentence and paragraph-level skills. Therefore, midterm grades might more strongly reflect their attendance, homework, in-class work, quizzes, etc.

#### In terms of 300

This kind of writing sample test might not identify the range of skills necessary to succeed in ENGWR 300. Santa Rosa Junior College and Monterrey Peninsula Community College—both which have used a writing sample assessment test since the 1980s—have moved to using an assessment test that’s a simplified version of our current ENGWR 101 final exam. Students

read a  $\frac{3}{4}$  to one-page article that states a position, then are asked to briefly summarize it and explain whether they agree or disagree with the author's perspective.

Representatives at both colleges cannot say enough good things about this change. While they fought hard over the years to keep the simpler writing sample test, they feel that this newer version more accurately assesses the reading comprehension necessary to succeed in writing classes, as well as the ability to write academically (as opposed to personally). It therefore assesses students more accurately since composition classes at all levels are designed to help students write academically.

#### Midterm grades and teacher perceptions

Students assessed into our composition classes via a multiple-choice test (the CTEP). Therefore, we asked teachers to rate, on a 3-point scale, whether students who had taken the CTEP were accurately placed in their classes.

<u>Course level</u>	<u>Should be lower</u>	<u>Appropriate</u>	<u>Should be higher</u>
41	3%	83%	6%
51	14%	72%	14%
101	20%	72%	7%
300	17%	81%	

As I recall, the minimum standard for assessment tests is that they should accurately place students 75% of the time. While it looks like the CTEP works fairly well for 41 and 300, I'm concerned about the number of students who seem to be misplaced in 51 and the number of students in 101 and 300 who might be better served in lower classes.

#### **Planned Implementation:**

The May 10 letter suggests only my personal theories about the initial outcomes of the study. Once final grades are added (in August) to the information collected so far, and we have a broader picture of student course success, I will solicit input from my English department colleagues about how we can use this information to inform our assessment instruments, our policies and our curricula.

#### **Broader Implications:**

If we determine that the writing sample is a valid placement tool for our students, it has the potential to enhance articulation between English courses and English departments in our district. The department chairs at SCC, Jeff Knorr of English and Brett Thomas of ESL, strongly feel that faculty norming sessions for scoring the tests enhance department understanding about course progression and promote consistency among faculty when it comes to grading papers. This is especially important in large departments that rely on many adjuncts to teach a wide variety of levels. They believe

that the benefits of the process grow with each cycle of scoring sessions. As more people participate, and as more people have their understanding reinforced by regular participation, the more consistency there is within the department.

Also, if our sister colleges agree, like ESL, to all use a writing sample scored with similar rubrics, the process of scoring these tests has the potential to enhance our consistency as a district, both in terms of our programs and in terms of test portability.

In sum, the data analysis described above will help the English department determine whether we want to go forward with a writing sample. If we do want to go forward, we will be better able to

- Determine whether we want to use SCC's test as a model
- Contribute to conversations with FLC and ARC regarding district test portability
- Decide whether we want to use the statewide writing sample test when it is released in a few years

On a more philosophical note, I am impressed by the tremendous support for this writing sample test from full-time and adjunct English faculty alike. On the main campus of CRC, students take the CTEP to assess into one of 54 sections of composition. The majority of these courses are taught by adjuncts who are juggling the expectations of more than one campus. Many were shocked to discover that CRC relies so heavily on the CTEP to help place students in a writing class. They believe a writing sample is a far more accurate indication of student abilities than a multiple-choice test. Therefore, although I asked them to set aside 45 minutes of precious Week One class time in order to have students participate in this test, nearly all were willing to modify their lesson plans.

In fact, by the beginning of Week Two, teachers had turned in full class sets of writing samples for 47 of our 54 sections. That is a return of 87%, far higher than the researchers and I had expected. In addition, nearly every teacher had taken the time to go through his or her class sets in order to double-check the student ID numbers against their rosters to make sure that all the data was accurate. Although I had asked people to do so if they could, I honestly only expected a few full-timers to add that extra task to their full schedules. Also, I was overwhelmed by the number of full-time and adjunct teachers who emailed or wrote quick thank-you's to me for conducting the study.

We have a tremendous force for implementing change, and whatever the outcome of this particular study, it seems the English faculty believe a change is necessary. Our student population has shifted significantly since the time the current assessment instruments were put in place. Especially during these difficult economic times, we should continue to seek the best process for guiding students into the classes from which they'll receive the most benefits in light of their long-term educational goals.