



Synopsis of the Three-Year Writing Assessment at UVSC, 2003-2006

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Based on existing research parameters, in 2003 the Department of English began a three-year assessment of the Writing program at Utah Valley State College. The full study to date has been submitted (the third year data is being compiled for Fall 2006).

At random, the computer picked student papers in numbers that would provide a statistical variance of 5% or less and the papers were rated by original instructors and then by independent assessors (writing instructors of the same courses but not of the particular students). The assessment categorized responses, provided a numerical scale, and developed results rating the following:

Control of Topic	Word Choice
Support	Sentence Fluency
Organization	Scholarship
Conventions	

Voice

The comparisons were from samples taken at the end of each class within a given course, hence ending 1010 student papers were compared to ending 2010 or ending 2020 student papers. A previous state-wide assessment showed in that study that UVSC student papers showed a gain of approximately 18 percentage points when samples were from pre-1010 students (prior to any college writing course) compared to post 2010 and 2020 students (after 2 semesters of writing instruction).

Comparable growth for half of that time period (from the end of the first semester of instruction to the end of the second) using similar assessment methods in the three-year study, showed about a 3.5% gain overall. The assumption, putting the statistical data together, is that the first semester of writing instruction creates about a 14% value added and the second semester creates about 4%.

These numbers are not unexpected considering the nature of writing and writing assessment. Writing is a skill, and early growth is more clearly visible while the fine-tuning and honing of the skill shows up in smaller and smaller gradations as students progress. These numbers bear out some of the assessment's expectations and hoped for results.

Within the broader statistics, certain of the areas listed above showed greater growth between courses, areas such as Scholarship and Conventions, since the second course focuses more on them than the first, but most areas showed only slight improvement as expected.

However, within the statistics was an unanticipated result. The difference between assessment by instructors and assessment by independent evaluators on the same samples was statistically significant at minus 10.5%. In other words, the independent evaluators rated the same samples 10.5% lower than the instructors who taught the students. Most

who interpret this result recognize that writing instruction is varied, and that the original instructors placed greater value on the elements taught in their courses, and so they rated their own students higher because of that connection. On the other hand, the second evaluators, those who did not teach the particular students, and who have different emphases than the instructors who did, rated the students substantially lower. The thought is that they were influenced by the elements they valued and that were not taught, at least with the same emphasis as these raters might have provided in their own courses.

The argument that grows from such a statistic is represented by two general philosophies governing the teaching of writing. The first is the following: that writing is not a cleanly definable subject; that teachers do not have to teach the same things in writing courses; and that the results were so close (only minus 10.5%) that the results were fairly consistent and as close as they should be. The second is the following: that the courses should have a testable consistency in the core areas listed even though teachers provide course content from their own areas of knowledge and expertise; that testable consistency can be accomplished with some effort; and that students have a right to expect the core of a given course to be consistent.

The faculty has engaged these differences with no consensus. The strong feelings from each philosophy continue to keep an acceptable solution at bay. The second philosophy seeking more consistency would require efforts to develop that consistency and without a reasonable consensus, those efforts are not possible. The result is that the status quo remains with a broad range of instruction in the writing courses at UVSC, and the expectation that the current difference in scoring between instructors and independent raters will continue.

The three-year study is now complete and the assessment committee is examining the assessment itself and developing a more accurate tool, reaching for more clear data. The anticipation is that the assessment will continue annually as will these reports.