

Report on Written Communication Professional Learning Community, Fall 2017-Spring 2018

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Summary	3
What the PLC did	4
Formative Assessment: A First Encounter with Writing at WOU	4
Procedure	5
Initial Discussion with Campus	5
Formation of the Group	5
Material Collection	6
Meetings and Review Process	7
What the PLC found	7
History: Post-College II Writing Course Became WI Courses	7
Findings on Procedure	8
Colleagues' Concern	8
Rubric Confusion, Imperfection	9
Lack of Assessment Experience, Norming	9
Faculty Requests for Help	10
Data and Observations	10
Samples	10
Limitations	10
Observations	11
Survey	13
Interpretation	13
Drafting, Peer Review, Editing Before Final Draft Submission	13
Writing Center Utilization	14
Low Rubric Milestone Scores	14
Prescriptive and Disciplinary Writing	14
Ways forward	16
Possible Curricular Change	16
Faculty Support	16
Culture of Writing	16
Next W PLC	17
Timing and Organization	17
Norming	17
Rubric Improvement	18
Automatic collection	18

Summary

- Over the 2017-2018 school year, the W PLC collected assignment samples from courses across the university that had Written Communication as a course goal, and collected “typical student samples” (judged at teachers’ discretion) of those assignments from classes that were general education classes.
- The PLC’s goal was “formative assessment” to learn about the existing culture of writing instruction on WOU’s campus, rather than strict “evaluative assessment” to identify possible problem areas with a quantitative focus. The PLC still evaluated student samples (and drew limited conclusions about writing at WOU), but it was understood that this study was not conclusive, especially from a quantitative perspective.
- The PLC’s organizers sought to make the process as unthreatening as possible given the suspicion surrounding assessment on campus, and the results were mixed: faculty showed some interest in the process, but still seemed apprehensive about their work being judged.
- The PLC adopted the LEAP VALUE rubric for Written Communication (attached to the end of this report) as a sort of placeholder for examining the samples of student work that were received. The rubric was useful in fostering discussions about the qualities of writing that instructors care about, but the rubric’s ambiguous language led to confusion among both PLC members and faculty. It is recommended that next time the rubric be revised for clarity.
- The PLC identified strengths and weaknesses in writing at WOU:
 - The PLC observed a great variety of strong instructional practices among teachers, and were inspired by the approaches of many instructors.
 - Most teachers reported providing key resources for their students, though these numbers could be even higher.
 - Teachers’ mean expectations of quality for rubric features tended to be below 3 on a scale of 1-4, and the quality they observed in student samples was below that, and the PLC evaluated the student samples at even a little lower than that. This may be a concern, given that most courses considered in the PLC were upper-division.
- A fair number of writing assignments observed by the PLC included so many instructions that students were not granted meaningful autonomy. It is recommended that teachers of writing courses are provided with assignment workshops to improve this issue.
- This report cannot recommend any reduction in required writing classes for students, but future curriculum committees may want to consider a revision or regular review of Writing Intensive courses given that the initial vision of WI courses has not fully come to pass.
- Optimally, there would be a thriving culture of writing instruction on campus. Some work is underway in bringing this about, and further Ideas on how this could happen are included in the report.

What the PLC did

Formative Assessment: A First Encounter with Writing at WOU

The goal of the 2017-2018 Written Communication Professional Learning Community (W PLC) at Western Oregon University (WOU) was to engage in formative assessment work to begin understanding what upper-division writing looks like at the university. The W PLC looked at all classes with a course goal that aligned to the Undergraduate Learning Objective (ULO) of Written Communication, and paid special attention to Writing Intensive (WI) courses and their place in the curriculum, since all students at WOU have to take at least two upper-division (300- or 400-level) WI courses.

Because no previous assessment of this kind had been performed, the then-Vice Provost for Academic Effectiveness Dr. Susanne Monahan began the planning of the W PLC with chair Dr. Lars Söderlund as a “formative assessment” endeavor. Formative assessment in this case means that the W PLC planned to look at samples of writing assignments and student writing submissions with the primary goal of learning about, rather than evaluating, the approaches to teaching writing at WOU and students’ responses to those writing prompts. The metaphors that were used throughout the W PLC’s work were accordingly exploratory: it was often said that the group sought to “get the lay of the land” or to create a “map of the territory” of written communication at WOU.

It could be said that the W PLC’s work was not only formative but also structured “on the fly” due to the limited history of assessment at WOU. Though some assessments had been performed in the past, assessment as an activity does not have a long history at WOU. Even the previous assessment of Quantitative Literacy (Q) courses the previous year did not create a momentum for the W PLC, for a number of reasons: 1) There is not a high rate of overlap between the teachers of Q courses and the teachers of WI courses, 2) Teachers qualified to teach Quantitative Literacy are predominantly in STEM fields, which tend to be more friendly to assessment as an activity (perhaps given assessment’s often-quantitative bent) and 3) Courses focused on writing almost invariably embrace a variety of teaching methods and rubrics that view success as flexible and subjective, while quantitative-focused courses inevitably defer to objective measures of success.

In addition, since assessment is relatively novel at WOU, many faculty do not yet view it as a meaningful endeavor that is strongly integrated into their work as teachers. This, combined with ongoing concerns from faculty that assessment represents a new type of work that they will not be compensated for, creates an atmosphere in which teachers can be leery of assessment work.

Thus, at the outset of the W PLC, very little was known about the culture of writing at WOU, and it seemed wise to tread carefully in assessing a possibly suspicious faculty. The goal was to draw a map of the territory not only in terms of what is happening in writing courses, but also in how

those courses should be viewed. The W PLC would have to consist of a committee that satisfactorily represented programs across campus and to decide on a shared rubric and vocabulary for discussing writing. Together, the group would look at instructor and student work to identify patterns in writing that have emerged at the university, and would then have to consider how the group could foster a positive attitude about both writing instruction and the assessment process across campus. And ultimately, the goal was to have good conversations about writing among peers who were invested in the topic.

Procedure

Initial Discussion with Campus

To pave the way for the assessment, Vice Provost Monahan organized a kickoff week Bar Camp event on September 20, 2017, in which Assistant Professor of Earth Science and GIS Melinda Shimizu (Inquiry and Analysis PLC Chair) and Dr. Söderlund could discuss the upcoming work of the PLCs. The session immediately followed Dr. Breeann Flesch's talk on the Quantitative Literacy assessment that she had chaired the year before, and the turnout for the Bar Camp was fairly robust. Dr.s Shimizu, Söderlund, and Monahan described the essential points of the PLCs to come: the assessments would cover courses with Inquiry and Analysis and Written Communication as a ULO (respectively), the assessment processes were to be formative rather than evaluative, and the PLCs would require a committee of interested faculty members.

Formation of the Group

Faculty interested in taking part in the W PLC had begun coming forward since the Spring of 2017, and by the end of September everyone who would participate in the PLC had volunteered. In addition to Dr.s Monahan and Söderlund. The group members were, in alphabetical order:

- Josh Daniels, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), Humanities Division (HD)
- Dr. Leigh Graziano, Director of First Year Writing, CLAS, HD
- Dr. Bob Hautala, CLAS, Division of Health and Exercise Science
- Samantha Hafner, CLAS, HD
- Dr. Chloe Hughes, College of Education (COE), Division of Education and Leadership (DEL)
- Dr. Melanie Landon-Hayes, COE, DEL
- Dr. Jennifer Moreno, CLAS, Social Science Division (though she ultimately had to withdraw from the group)
- Dr. Emily Plec, CLAS, HD (also had to withdraw)
- Dr. Joshua Schulze, COE, DEL
- Dr. Chehalis Strapp, CLAS, Behavioral Sciences Division
- Dr. Diane Tarter, CLAS, Creative Arts Division
- Tandy Tillinghast-Voit, CLAS, HD

While not every division was represented in the PLC, the group represented a variety of disciplines from across the university.

The group initially met on October 6 from 2:30-4:30, and each member brought a writing assignment from their class to discuss. Though the group only discussed a few of the assignments, the group did begin to consider what issues would be important to observe and analyze over the course of the PLC.

Material Collection

In the Fall of 2017 and the Winter and Spring of 2018, the PLC asked instructors of writing classes to submit electronic samples of writing assignments and typical student responses to those assignments. The PLC requested that instructors submit “typical student responses” to the assignments because the PLC did not yet have the technology to request random samples nor the time to review multiple samples from each course. Instructors’ judgements of a “typical” assignment sometimes skewed to a higher quality of student work than is average, but this still allowed PLC members to see the makeup of writing assignments across the university and how students were capable of responding to those prompts.

Specifically, two types of submissions were requested:

- For general education (gen ed) courses with Written Communication as a ULO, instructors submitted both assignment instructions and a piece of typical student work
- For non-gen ed courses, instructors submitted assignment instructions without typical student work

The PLC also reviewed survey data from instructors. This was done with the help of Beverly West, Operations Coordinator of the Center for Academic Innovation, who managed and programmed the collection of data for the PLC. While Moodle and TK20 were attempted as collection tools, ultimately the PLC found that Google Forms was the best way to collect samples and survey data. Google Forms also made it easy for the PLC to collect survey data about instructors’ teaching practices and understanding of their assignments. The survey asked:

- Which rubric features were a major focus of the assignment
- The level (rated 1-4) of each rubric at which teachers expected students to perform on the assignment
- The level of each rubric a student actually performed in the included student example (if applicable)
- Which resources the teacher provided to their students and encouraged their students to use, with options including the Writing Center, teacher-led pre-writing activities, student peer review, and draft submission(s) to the teacher before the final draft

Meetings and Review Process

The W PLC met on the first Friday each month, starting in December 2017, from 2:30-4:30pm. Each meeting began with check-in in which members were asked to share their thoughts on the PLC process as it evolved. Afterward, the meetings would include some combination of looking at student samples and teacher instructions, rating those samples using the LEAP Written Communication rubrics, discussing group members' ratings of the samples, and looking at the survey statistics (prepared by Coordinator West and Vice Provost Monahan).

The group's approach to analyzing the student work changed over the course of our meetings, as the group learned what it considered to be the optimum procedure. In the PLC's initial meeting, the group agreed to use the LEAP Written Communication VALUE rubric, which considers these five aspects of writing:

- Context of and Purpose for Writing
- Content Development
- Genre and Disciplinary Conventions
- Sources and Evidence
- Control of Syntax and Mechanics

At first, multiple group members said they felt unqualified to consider the student samples without the context of the teachers' assignments, but over time the group became comfortable with attempting to judge the students' work on its own merits. For this reason, the group eventually requested that the teacher's instructions (and, importantly, the teacher's name) was only included in each sample after the student's work.

What the PLC found

History: Post-College II Writing Course Became WI Courses

The W PLC's work was haunted by the history of Writing Intensive courses at WOU, specifically the incompletely fulfilled goal that WOU's previous upper-division writing courses (WR 222 and 323) would be replaced by writing courses in each discipline at the university. The category of Writing Intensive courses was initially created to replace these previous upper-division writing courses that all students had to take, with the idea that instead of standardized courses for all students, students would take writing courses customized to their disciplines. In some cases, this has been effective; the Psychology major requires multiple WI courses in its upper-division core, for instance. These writing courses dovetail with the high amount of writing that is done in the field.

But Writing Intensive courses are a challenge for some disciplines, both in terms of writing disciplinary and faculty workload. Not all fields of study consider themselves to be writing-heavy fields, and even some that do may not have a history of writing pedagogy to draw from. In addition, it takes a substantial amount of work to design a WI course, to run it through the curriculum adoption system at WOU, to staff it with faculty frequently enough to offer it to students, and to teach it. And the teaching is especially challenging: even though writing courses are capped at 25 students, the process of designing writing prompts (and readings and writing scenarios), making clear the field's standards for writing quality, and then reviewing students' multi-page writing assignments, optimally in multiple drafts and with pre-writing activities, is a major departure from the forms of assessment with which many faculty are acquainted (and comfortable).

And it is not quite correct to say that all faculty should be comfortable teaching writing in their discipline because all faculty members at the university are required to publish their own research or creative work (which almost always includes a writing component). The chair of the PLC, Dr. Söderlund, has found in his research with Dr. Jaclyn Wells of the University of Alabama at Birmingham that even in the field of Rhetoric and Composition (the home discipline of writing instruction in English) it is rare even for professors to be directly instructed about how to research, write, and publish professional studies¹. Faculty members are expected to “just sit down and do it,” which is not the sort of direct instruction that one can (or should, responsibly) pass down to one's students.

Thus, WI courses are sometimes taught in some cases by teachers who are in a crunch, with little time and few resources, and students find themselves taking Writing Intensive courses far outside of their discipline.

Findings on Procedure

There were a number of important observations the W PLC made about the procedure that was used to collect and interpret writing course data.

Colleagues' Concern

While most faculty were very gracious about providing their samples (and many indicated gratefulness to the PLC members for their work), it was also clear that many faculty were nervous about having their teaching methods and student work examined and discussed by other faculty. Despite the PLC's emphasis on formative evaluation, people felt they were being evaluated and that they might be subject to negative consequences. This phenomenon may have been inevitable, as again there simply is no culture of assessment that exists at WOU to make faculty feel comfortable about this sort of assessment.

¹ For more information, see “Preparing Graduate Students for Academic Publishing,” pages 131-156 in the journal *Pedagogy*, volume 18 issue 1.

This was seen clearly in faculty submissions. Some assignments were accompanied by long explanations of how the assignment functions, how it fulfills the WI requirement, and/or why students behave as they do. In multiple cases, these explanations were longer than the accompanying assignment instructions and student sample combined. These explanations seemed to be attempts by faculty to have their work validated and to have their perspectives heard.

Rubric Confusion, Imperfection

The way that faculty categorized the value of their assignments in terms of the LEAP rubrics told a similar story. It is rare that all five rubric items (Context of and Purpose for Writing, Content Development, Genre and Disciplinary Conventions, Sources and Evidence, and Control of Syntax and Mechanics) are satisfied and evaluated by one assignment; most assignments at least focus on students working with just a few. While the W PLC attempted to make this clear this from early on in the process, many faculty submissions from the first round of collection identified all five rubric features as key to the way they evaluate the assignment. Ultimately, the W PLC was able to obviate this pattern in the Winter and Spring by only allowing teachers to select a maximum of three rubric items as those that are stressed in the included assignment.

Faculty concern for which rubric elements their assignments stressed may have been magnified by the rubric's imperfections. From the first meeting, Writing Program Administrator Dr. Leigh Graziano noted that the wording of the rubric is inexact; it is difficult to judge, for instance, "graceful language" or "mastery of the subject," two terms included in the rubric. Also, it was only over time that the PLC was able to parse the difference between the rubric elements, as items like "Context of and Purpose for Writing" and "Genre and Disciplinary Conventions" are similar, but it can be difficult to comb through students' writing to find evidence of them.

The rubric did begin to evolve, albeit in a limited way. Not only did the PLC begin to wrap their heads around the meaning of each rubric element by the end of the process, they also added an additional means of rating: a "zero" in addition to the existing 1-4 rubric rating system. One faculty member who submitted their assignment and student sample requested the change, as the faculty member felt that there should be a way to indicate that the student's work did not even attempt to satisfy an aspect of the rubric.

Lack of Assessment Experience, Norming

Ultimately, many faculty members on the PLC had little experience with the sort of curriculum-wide assessment the PLC performed, and this made the process challenging and confusing, but also thoughtful. The group was ably assisted by our Education faculty, who have experience in assessment, and especially by Dr. Graziano, who has significant experience in writing assessment specifically.

This lack of experience surfaced throughout the process, but a central issue was the decision the group made not to take part in initial "norming." In assessment, norming is a process in which a

group adopts shared standards for assessment by examining multiple sample documents. Usually this happens over the course of a long meeting, during which time assignments are silently evaluated and then discussed by the group, and over rounds of evaluation and discussion group members eventually arrive at the same standards.

Initially, it seemed like a good idea not to norm, as 1) the group had not set aside time for norming and 2) the diversity of opinion in evaluation was perceived to be a benefit and a catalyst to discussions about writing. The discussions were indeed fruitful, which was an important part of this initial, formative assessment. However, over the course of the PLC's work there were often periods of confusion and discussion about the shared values of the group, and this would certainly have been smoothed out by an initial norming session.

For instance, one very interesting suggestion about the process came from Dr. Bob Hautala of Health and Exercise Science, who noted that our evaluation of student work and instructor assignments seemed incomplete without a detailed account of teachers' own rubrics. This was true given the far-ranging discussions that the PLC had, which sometimes included ruminations about teachers' understandings of writing. But from a traditional assessment perspective, and the one the PLC gradually grew closer to adopting as they focused almost more on student work and less on faculty instructions, it is undoubtedly true that the group could have had more rigor in our evaluations and more of a shared perspective if the PLC had all taken part in norming early in the process.

Faculty Requests for Help

One aspect of the process that was very encouraging was faculty members' requests for help on an assignment they submitted. This was sometimes the result of faculty members' confusion about what the assessment process entails; faculty members sometimes thought the PLC was evaluating the quality of their instruction, and so could offer judgements on the strengths or weaknesses of their assignment, or tips on how to improve their writing instruction. But the spirit of these requests was encouraging--it suggests that there may be faculty interest in workshops on writing assignment design, which would be a positive outcome of the PLC.

Data and Observations

Samples

Limitations

As alluded to above, there was some confusion among teachers (and PLC members) about the meaning of the rubric that teachers were asked to use to categorize the values of their assignments. Many instructors initially said that their assignments used and evaluated all five aspects of the rubric, which muddied the waters of what PLC members should actually evaluate, but this issue disappeared once instructors were limited to choosing a maximum of three of the five. Still, the rubric was not universally understood.

The W PLC's inter-rater reliability was not formally measured, but the members' ratings almost always clustered around one number, with a few adjacent ratings. When there was an outlier in the ratings, the discussion that ensued clarified why this was the case and there were no major, lingering disagreements about scoring.

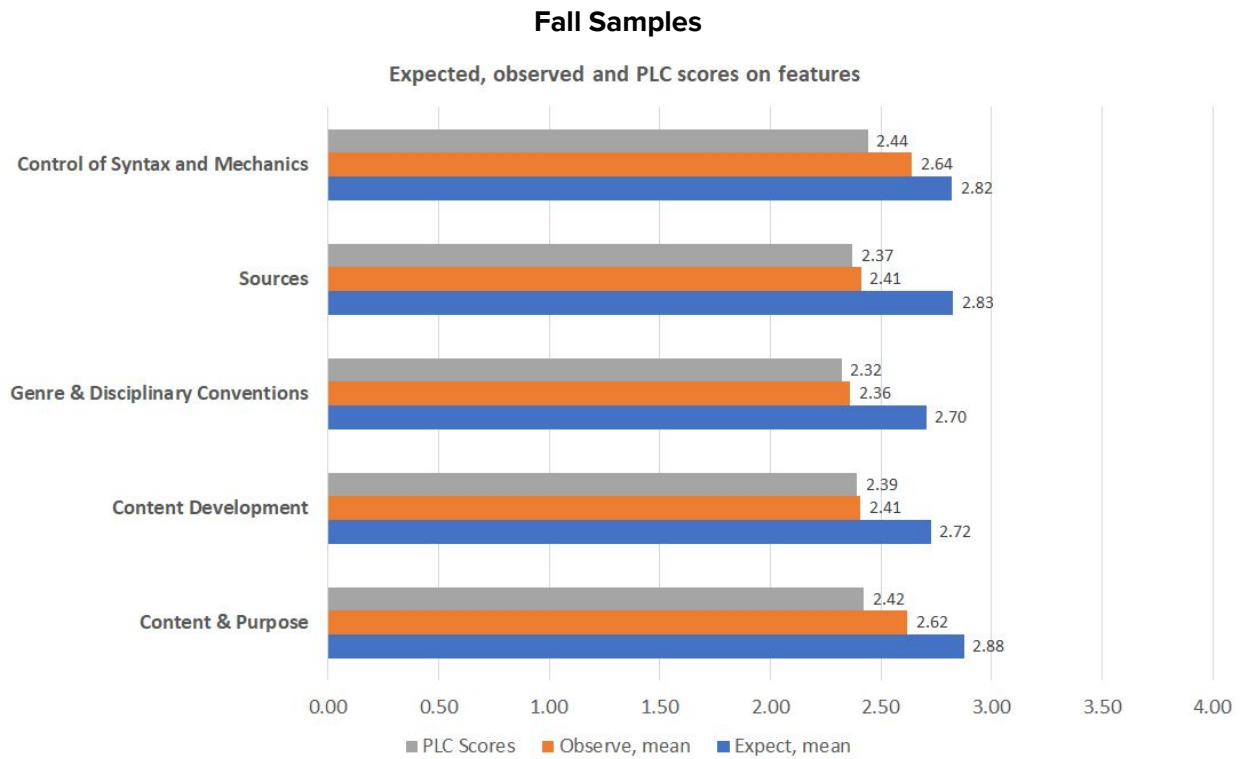
As in most studies, the samples of writing assignments and student work did not represent every example of the phenomenon. Not every teacher of writing submitted a sample assignment and artifact of student work, but the PLC did have a relatively high rate of compliance. During some sessions, especially later in the year when administrative and teaching duties forced some members to be absent, the PLC was unable to rate all submissions they received. Still, the data below from the Fall is drawn from a sample of 32 submissions, while there were 37 submissions for Winter classes.

Observations

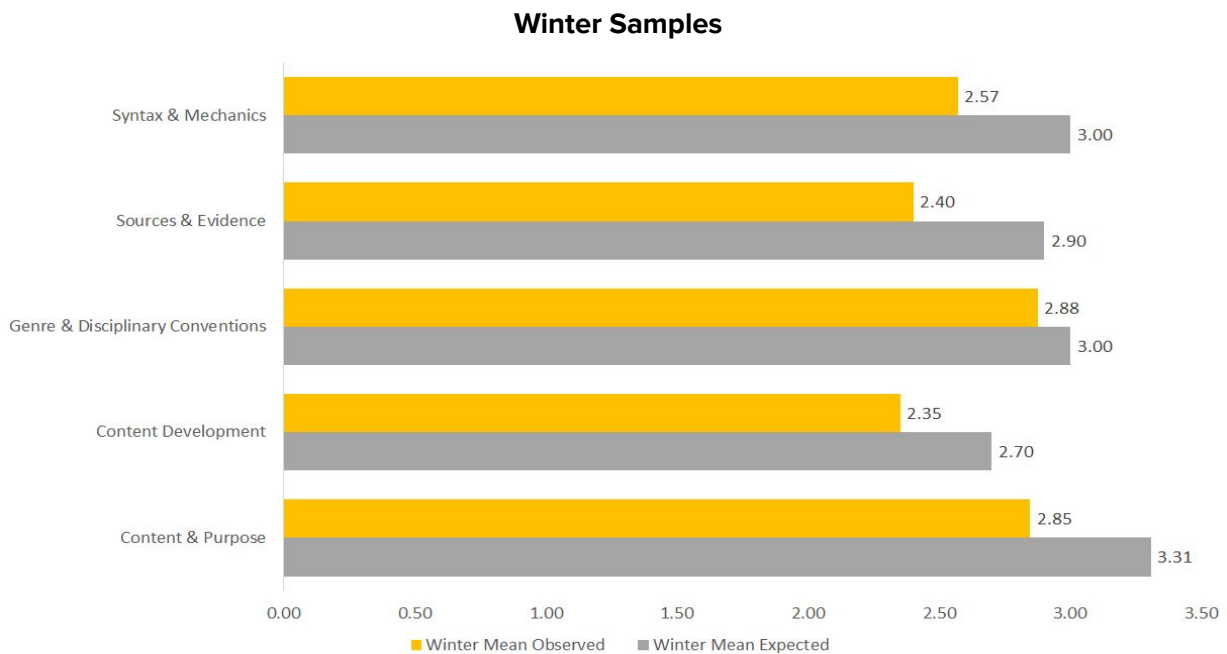
Despite the limitations of the rubric, the PLC did observe some interesting aggregate phenomena in the samples we evaluated. In the teacher instructions, PLC members noticed the diversity of how writing is taught, not only in the variety of subjects (to be expected) but also in the different teaching methods and the nature and amount of instructions included by teachers. On one hand, this led to admiring statements like, "I'd like to steal this in my next class," or "I've never thought about this subject this way." On the other hand, PLC members noticed that it was not uncommon for teachers to include lengthy and specific assignments instructions. This is a complicated, negative-tinged phenomenon that will be discussed below, in "Interpretation."

Below is a chart of the Fall student writing samples that the PLC reviewed, with metrics depicting the mean level of quality in each rubric item that teachers said they expect from their students, the mean level that teachers rated in the sample they submitted to the PLC, and the mean level the PLC members rated in their evaluation of the samples. Three trends are obvious:

1. The ratings of instructors and of the PLC members were quite close. The scores varied at a mean of .1, and only varied 4 or 2 hundredths of a point for three of the items.
2. The more considerable distance is between the teachers' expectations and the actual rating of the "typical" student work, which varied at a mean of .302.
3. All scores are lower than 3.0 (out of 4) for this assessment focused on upper-division courses. Some of this could be explained by the 12 200-level courses and 2 100-level courses considered during the PLC, but given the remaining 80 300- and 400-level courses, that does not account for all of the sub-3 level scoring, nor does it explain the dips between expected, observed, and PLC-observed rubric feature ratings.



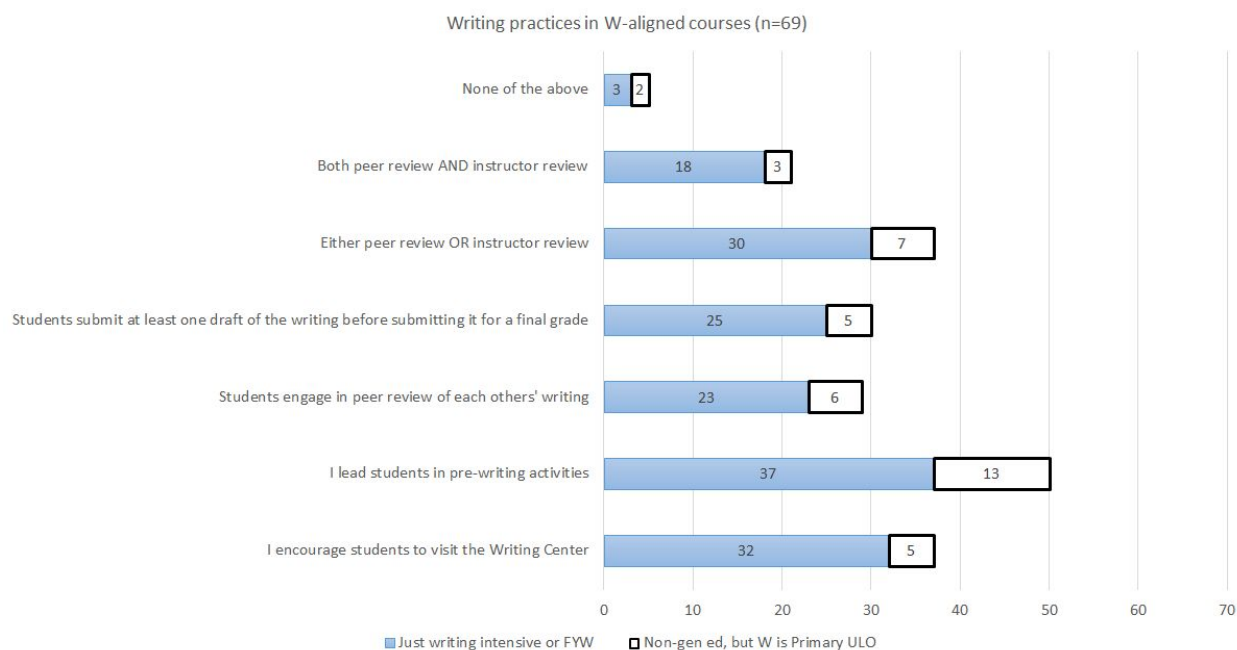
The next chart shows the Winter data for instructor mean observed and mean expected rubric feature ratings. The scores are almost all a bit higher, though the mean dip between expected and observed scores also is a little higher, at .37.



Survey

Below is a chart of the survey data collected by the PLC in the Fall and Winter, specifically the teaching practices and resources that instructors provide and encourage students to use in W-aligned courses. Here, too, there are a few statistics to note:

1. One guideline for Writing Intensive course approval is “Students should have opportunities to have peer feedback for polished writing assignments, and/or instructors should intervene in the early stages of writing a paper through conferences or comments on drafts.” 58 of 69 teachers, or 84 percent, indicated that they offer one or both of these opportunities.
2. 50 of 69 teachers, or 72.4 percent, indicated that they lead students in pre-writing activities. However, this question may be a little misleading given the ambiguity of what exactly “leading” students entails.
3. 37 of 69 teachers, or 54 percent, encourage their students to visit the Writing Center.



Interpretation

Drafting, Peer Review, Editing Before Final Draft Submission

It seems positive that in 84 percent of W-aligned courses students are provided with peer review and/or instructor feedback before their final drafts are submitted, and even more positive that in 30 percent of classes students get both. Similarly positive is the 72.4 percent of classes that feature the teacher leading students in pre-writing activities. It is important to see these things

happening, as they represent a significant amount of work on the part of instructors, and research in writing shows that these opportunities pay significant dividends in the development of students' writing ability. Also, it seems fair to say that when students are guided in their writing, and when they know that their work is not being immediately and irrevocably graded upon first submission, they are able to approach writing with less fear.

On the negative side, this leaves 16 percent of W-aligned classes in which students are not provided with pre-final submission feedback, and 26 percent in which they are not led in pre-writing activities. This is a concern, as these students may be getting relatively unstructured writing practice, reinforcing poor habits and a sense of writing as mysterious and difficult.

Writing Center Utilization

54 percent of surveyed instructors indicate that they recommend students go to the Writing Center, which is a low number. Our campus Writing Center is excellent: the students are professional and come from diverse areas of study, the center provides resources for all types of writing, the center offers appointments during the day, at night, or fully online, and it caters to both undergraduate and graduate students who are first- or second-language English learners. That 46 percent of instructors would not indicate that they recommend students visit the Writing Center is shocking, as Writing Center representatives contact teachers of every writing class each quarter and request the opportunity to speak in their classes. This data point is so surprising that one interpretation of this statistic is that some teachers recommend the Writing Center but would not consider it central to how they teach writing in their courses.

Low Rubric Milestone Scores

The mean rubric feature scores that instructors expect were generally below 3, and the mean of instructors' observed scores were always below the mean of instructors' expected scores. This report has now discussed the possibly challenging novelty of the Written Communication LEAP rubric multiple times, and that novelty may create strange patterns in the data we have.

Still, it is true that in the data we collected, the "typical" student sample consistently scored lower than what the teacher expected, and that may indicate a problem. Teachers are frustrated when students underperform according to the teachers' standards, and in this study we have some initial evidence that this happens consistently at WOU.

Prescriptive and Disciplinary Writing

W PLC members, especially those who teach in the First Year Writing program or the Writing concentration within the English department, were concerned about the many assignments they noted that granted little autonomy to students in their writing. When instructors essentially gave students a formula on how to write, these PLC members were concerned that students were not growing as writers but instead becoming practitioners in following directions. Optimally, a college writing class would help students gain confidence in their abilities to understand writing

situations, decide what sort of writing is needed, write the document, and revise it, either on their own or with others.

There are a number of reasons why the sort of “prescriptive” writing assignments of the sort that the PLC members criticized are created. Sometimes an assignment prompt simply grows in size as students ask questions, and little by little, year by year, it becomes a sort of paint-by-numbers enterprise that helps students to write consistently polished documents but without being thoughtful about what they are actually doing. Sometimes students’ low performance or low confidence drives teachers to provide them with more help, which can show a similar snowball effect in assignment instruction growth.

Solutions to this problem are many. The teacher can include a reflective component to the assignment, in which students must write about why they are doing what they are doing. Instructors can require students to make more independent decisions in how they fulfill the assignment’s requirements. Instructors can buttress the assignment with additional work in which students examine the scenario their writing is responding to. Whatever the approach, the question instructors should consider asking is this: are students growing as writers, becoming capable of doing something new on their own, or are they exclusively relying on the instructions provided to improve at writing this specific, formulaic assignment?

There are complicating factors here, however: the perils of prescriptive writing can be easily confused with the merits of disciplinary writing. Disciplinary writing is the writing that happens in a field, which can often have many formulaic elements. Lab reports and research papers can look quite consistent in an area of study, and if researchers depart from that formula they distinguish themselves in a bad way. In the case of predictable genres such as this, students must learn how to write well in a specific context, but that context will likely not change over the students’ careers, and while students may have some autonomy in how they explain a concept, we would never say that they have autonomy in how they set up the document.

This is a potentially confusing situation, but we could say that there are two big takeaways:

1. Even in the case of predictive, disciplinary writing, students should gradually develop their self-confidence as writers, growing in their faith that they can handle writing situations and that they know how to respond to writing challenges as they come up.
2. WOU as an institution may have a choice to make: should all students graduate with the ability to write in multiple scenarios, adapting to various audiences, contexts, and purposes, prepared to write in new genres, or is it sufficient for students to graduate with an advanced sense of the disciplinary writing that exists in their field of study? If flexibility in writing is desired, it may be prudent to reconsider a specific requirement or recommendation that students take upper-division writing classes that enhance that flexibility, as existed before the creation of Writing Intensive courses.

Ways forward

Possible Curricular Change

In the current curriculum, all students at WOU must either take or test out of College Writing II and take at least two upper-division writing courses, optimally in their own discipline. This writing requirement is important, because written communication is not only important for expressing oneself with clarity, it is also commonly listed as the number one ability that employers desire in applicants.

Throughout the process, the W PLC did find evidence of inconsistency in the university's writing curriculum. Students' mean rubric scores were consistently below instructors' expectations, and students were evaluated at scores below a level 3 (of 4) on mean rubric feature scores, which may be below what the institution should expect from a study of mostly upper-division courses. 16 percent of teachers did not review pre-submission drafts or require peer review. 26 percent of teachers did not lead students in pre-writing activities. And in the case of many areas of study, the initial idea of replacing the common WR 222 and WR 323 courses with discipline-specific writing classes has not come to pass due to issues of workload, institutional coordination, or other reasons.

This may suggest that WOU should consider jettisoning Writing Intensive courses until there can be an initiative to ensure that students are getting an experience in writing instruction on par with the initial goal of Writing Intensive courses, but it would be an obvious and potentially catastrophic mistake for students at WOU to get less writing experience than they do now. Writing is an ability that chiefly improves with practice, and it seems impossible to defend the idea that students should have fewer writing experiences than they currently have, however structured they are. In fact, the low mean rubric scores may suggest that students need more direct writing instruction and practice, which is something the W PLC encourages faculty and administrators to consider in future curriculum changes.

Faculty Support

Culture of Writing

The establishment of a culture of writing instruction would be the most complete expression of this W PLC's findings. Our great conversations about writing and the non-judgmental atmosphere that the assessment and the PLC sought to foster are at odds with the confusion and concern that we sensed in many instructors' submissions, but that disconnect would be mended if all faculty members knew that there are resources and faculty members available to help plan writing classes and solve problems encountered in the writing classroom.

Such a defined culture may be difficult to create overnight, but there are some possible ingredients that could help with the development moving forward:

- W PLC chair Lars Söderlund will discuss the findings of this report (stressing its non-evaluative nature) at public events in the 2018-2019 school year.
- Dr. Graziano is already working with the Dean of CLAS to create more writing-centered events for students and faculty at the university.
- Several W PLC members indicated they would be happy to participate in assignment workshops in the 2018-2019 school year and beyond to assist other faculty members in creating projects that could maximally assist students in their development as writers.
- We faculty in the Writing concentration and the First Year Writing Program would like to be known as people who are happy to discuss writing classes and how they work, especially with any faculty members who struggle with the burden of teaching writing classes in fields of study where the primary goal is to learn content.

Of course, workload is a major issue in preventing this culture from developing in full, and it will likely continue to be so. Teachers often seek to improve their courses, but that is challenging without the time in which to do it, let alone the time in which to seek help from others, to learn more about the issue, and to integrate the resulting insights into courses. Perhaps if improving writing instruction remains an institutional goal for WOU, there could be further institutionally funded incentives for faculty teaching writing courses to develop their classes.

Next W PLC

Timing and Organization

This W PLC often found itself short on time and long on work, especially for the review of faculty assignment submissions and student samples. This was largely because of the emphasis on discussions in PLC meetings, which were helpful and interesting. Still, if the next W PLC is hoping to get a more rigorous, quantitative picture of what is happening in writing at WOU, it would be wise to spend more time on rating students' work and less time on discussing writing on campus in a general sense.

Norming

If future PLCs do take more of a quantitative approach, it is vital that the group spend time norming at the beginning of their work. The challenge is that norming often happens over the course of more than 2 hours, sometimes as much as an entire day's worth of time, and for faculty with many other time commitments this is asking a lot. During this PLC, we were lucky enough to include multiple faculty members who are in charge of programs and divisions, which may not have happened if the PLC had a more expansive time commitment.

Rubric Improvement

The rubric provided interesting discussions, but given the confusion it caused, the next PLC would benefit from creating a rubric that fits our local context and values at WOU. This would probably best be started separate from the committee, though initial brainstorming with the group could be effective. The quickest and most effective route would likely be for the chair (and maybe a smaller group) to create an outline of the rubric and then for the full PLC to fill in the details together. After all, the rubric need not be initially perfect; much effective work was still done during this PLC despite some confusion with the rubric.

Automatic collection

There is promise that the next time a W PLC is performed, the assignment and student samples may be automatically collected through integration of TK20 with the campus Moodle system. This would certainly offer a quicker collection process, less subjective sample choices by instructors, and probably a study more rigorous in a quantitative sense. It is unpredictable whether this would make instructors more comfortable with the process, though; the randomized collection of student work and instructor assignments may feel invasive.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION VALUE RUBRIC

for more information, please contact value@aacu.org



The VALUE rubrics were developed by teams of faculty experts representing colleges and universities across the United States through a process that examined many existing campus rubrics and related documents for each learning outcome and incorporated additional feedback from faculty. The rubrics articulate fundamental criteria for each learning outcome, with performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment. The rubrics are intended for institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing student learning, not for grading. The core expectations articulated in all 15 of the VALUE rubrics can and should be translated into the language of individual campuses, disciplines, and even courses. The utility of the VALUE rubrics is to position learning at all undergraduate levels within a basic framework of expectations such that evidence of learning can be shared nationally through a common dialog and understanding of student success.

Definition

Written communication is the development and expression of ideas in writing. Written communication involves learning to work in many genres and styles. It can involve working with many different writing technologies, and mixing texts, data, and images. Written communication abilities develop through iterative experiences across the curriculum.

Framing Language

This writing rubric is designed for use in a wide variety of educational institutions. The most clear finding to emerge from decades of research on writing assessment is that the best writing assessments are locally determined and sensitive to local context and mission. Users of this rubric should, in the end, consider making adaptations and additions that clearly link the language of the rubric to individual campus contexts.

This rubric focuses assessment on how specific written work samples or collections of work respond to specific contexts. The central question guiding the rubric is "How well does writing respond to the needs of audience(s) for the work?" In focusing on this question the rubric does not attend to other aspects of writing that are equally important: issues of writing process, writing strategies, writers' fluency with different modes of textual production or publication, or writer's growing engagement with writing and disciplinary through the process of writing.

Evaluators using this rubric must have information about the assignments or purposes for writing guiding writers' work. Also recommended is including reflective work samples of collections of work that address such questions as: What decisions did the writer make about audience, purpose, and genre as s/he compiled the work in the portfolio? How are those choices evident in the writing -- in the content, organization and structure, reasoning, evidence, mechanical and surface conventions, and citational systems used in the writing? This will enable evaluators to have a clear sense of how writers understand the assignments and take it into consideration as they evaluate.

The first section of this rubric addresses the context and purpose for writing. A work sample or collections of work can convey the context and purpose for the writing tasks it showcases by including the writing assignments associated with work samples. But writers may also convey the context and purpose for their writing within the texts. It is important for faculty and institutions to include directions for students about how they should represent their writing contexts and purposes.

Faculty interested in the research on writing assessment that has guided our work here can consult the National Council of Teachers of English/ Council of Writing Program Administrators' White Paper on Writing Assessment (2008; www.wpacouncil.org/whitepaper) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Writing Assessment: A Position Statement (2008; www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/123784.htm)

Glossary

The definitions that follow were developed to clarify terms and concepts used in this rubric only.

- **Content Development:** The ways in which the text explores and represents its topic in relation to its audience and purpose.
- **Context of and purpose for writing:** The context of writing is the situation surrounding a text: who is reading it? who is writing it? Under what circumstances will the text be shared or circulated? What social or political factors might affect how the text is composed or interpreted? The purpose for writing is the writer's intended effect on an audience. Writers might want to persuade or inform; they might want to report or summarize information; they might want to work through complexity or confusion; they might want to argue with other writers, or connect with other writers; they might want to convey urgency or amuse; they might write for themselves or for an assignment or to remember.
- **Disciplinary conventions:** Formal and informal rules that constitute what is seen generally as appropriate within different academic fields, e.g. introductory strategies, use of passive voice or first person point of view, expectations for thesis or hypothesis, expectations for kinds of evidence and support that are appropriate to the task at hand, use of primary and secondary sources to provide evidence and support arguments and to document critical perspectives on the topic. Writers will incorporate sources according to disciplinary and genre conventions, according to the writer's purpose for the text. Through increasingly sophisticated use of sources, writers develop an ability to differentiate between their own ideas and the ideas of others, credit and build upon work already accomplished in the field or issue they are addressing, and provide meaningful examples to readers.
- **Evidence:** Source material that is used to extend, in purposeful ways, writers' ideas in a text.
- **Genre conventions:** Formal and informal rules for particular kinds of texts and/or media that guide formatting, organization, and stylistic choices, e.g. lab reports, academic papers, poetry, webpages, or personal essays.
- **Sources:** Texts (written, oral, behavioral, visual, or other) that writers draw on as they work for a variety of purposes -- to extend, argue with, develop, define, or shape their ideas, for example.

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Evaluators are encouraged to assign a zero to any work sample or collection of work that does not meet benchmark (cell one) level performance.

	Capstone 4	Milestones		Benchmark 1
		3	2	
Context of and Purpose for Writing <i>Includes considerations of audience, purpose, and the circumstances surrounding the writing task(s).</i>	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work.	Demonstrates adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) (e.g., the task aligns with audience, purpose, and context).	Demonstrates awareness of context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., begins to show awareness of audience's perceptions and assumptions).	Demonstrates minimal attention to context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., expectation of instructor or self as audience).
Content Development	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work.	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to explore ideas within the context of the discipline and shape the whole work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through most of the work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop simple ideas in some parts of the work.
Genre and Disciplinary Conventions <i>Formal and informal rules inherent in the expectations for writing in particular forms and/or academic fields (please see glossary).</i>	Demonstrates detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task (s) including organization, content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices	Demonstrates consistent use of important conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s), including organization, content, presentation, and stylistic choices	Follows expectations appropriate to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) for basic organization, content, and presentation	Attempts to use a consistent system for basic organization and presentation.
Sources and Evidence	Demonstrates skillful use of high-quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing	Demonstrates consistent use of credible, relevant sources to support ideas that are situated within the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates an attempt to use credible and/or relevant sources to support ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates an attempt to use sources to support ideas in the writing.
Control of Syntax and Mechanics	Uses graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency, and is virtually error-free.	Uses straightforward language that generally conveys meaning to readers. The language in the portfolio has few errors.	Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include some errors.	Uses language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usage.