

SUBJECT: Writing Samples by our ENGH 0890 and 0990 Students

DATE: 30 September 2002

While making decisions about workloads for ENGH 0890 and 0990 teachers, you may want to see how inexperienced some of our ENGH 0890 and 0990 students are, regarding the activity of writing. Your seeing the inexperience of our students as writers, or seeing how poorly they write, may also suggest that ENGH 0890 and 0990 teachers need to consider improving our current placement and outcome assessment systems.

### Inexperienced Writers

At the beginning of the semester, Associate Professor Marrott and I asked our ENGH 0890 and 0990 students to write a timed-essay. We then scored these essays on a six-point scale. A score of 1 would indicate the weakest writers, and a score of 6 would indicate the strongest writers. I have attached essays that received a score of 1.5, 2.0, and 2.5; essays that were written by both ENGH 0890 and 0990 students. I have also attached a research report, i.e., memo, that summarizes the scores of 140 students (about half ENGH 0890 students and about half ENGH 0990 students).

These samples of our ENGH 0890 and 0990 students' writing suggest how much we need to teach them. Specifically, we need to give them a lot of experience writing, which in turn means that we need to assign and grade numerous papers. In short, the more writing we assign, the more about writing our students will learn.

By the way, grading one student's two- to three-page paper typically takes 20 minutes because a teacher writes critical comments on the paper, and student writers are different, one to the next. With 23 students in a class, grading one set of papers from one class takes about 8.5 hours. With three classes, assuming each class has 23 students, 25.5 hours are required to grade one paper from all three classes, assuming that a teacher can concentrate completely for 25.5 hours straight! If six papers are assigned to each class during a semester and assuming the teacher teaches 3 classes, a minimum of 153 hours is required to grade papers each semester. But, in reality, more hours than that are required. (Six two-page papers is less writing than is assigned to typical freshmen at Indiana University of Pennsylvania or to typical freshmen at Northern Arizona University. Basic writer, unfortunately, need more experience writing, not less, as compared to typical freshmen.)

Of course, on top of a possible six-paper schedule, we may have to be prepared to teach 15 hours in a classroom, i.e., prepare and implement lesson plans, as well as grade all the in-class writing or worksheets generated during those 15 hours in the class. (Of course, I have not mentioned doing any research, scholarship, or service work in this schedule.)

### Placement

I have attached writing samples from our ENGH 0890 and 0990 students because Professor Marrott and I suspected that our current placement system may be mixing together, instead of separating apart, the weaker and stronger writers. An analysis of the students' writing suggests that both stronger and weaker writers have a 50/50 chance of being placed in ENGH 0890 or 0990. In short, if we assume that having students write an essay is a valid way to place students into writing courses, it may be that the current placement system works as well as flipping a coin to determine who is in ENGH 0890 and 0990. This is not too surprising because the DRP is a reading test (not a writing test) and the Writing compass test is a grammar and vocabulary test (not a writing test).

### Outcome Assessment

In the past, we have called a timed-essay a final and have used these timed-essays as a part of our outcome assessment. Now, having our future in mind, and having my service charge regarding outcome assessment in mind, too, I think that we may want to complement that former **Apost-test** (or final) with a **Apre-test**. In other words, if all of our students wrote a timed-essay at the beginning of the semester, as some did this semester, then we would be in a position to measure the effectiveness of our curriculum by comparing pre- to post-test scores. In addition, we would be in a position to improve placement into ENGH 0890 and 0990. Accurate placement would, in turn, improve the teaching and learning of composition.

To summarize, and considering our faculty retreat, we are considering three ways to create outcome assessment:

- \$ A pre- and post-test. (The pre- and post-test would be the holistic scoring of timed-essays according to a six-point scale.)
- \$ A portfolio system. (Evaluating a collection of a student's papers according to a scale that all ENGH 0890 and 0990 teachers share and use. A portfolio assumes that all teachers are assigning and evaluating a similar number of papers.)
- \$ A student evaluation system. (Creating and implementing student surveys that ask for our students' feedback regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of our curriculum.)

Like you, I hope that Utah Valley State College makes the most of its past and future. While connecting our past to our future, I am anticipating that we will keep our students upper most in mind. So, one purpose of this memo is to provide you with a tangible example—samples of our students' writing—that may suggest how our lofty aspirations for our students may affect the real teaching (and learning) that our students should experience here.