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Eileen K. Camfield
University of the Pacific, ecamfield@pacific.edu

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Fast and Fruitful: Effective Writing Assessment for Determining the Success of New Initiatives

Eileen Kogl Camfield
University of the Pacific
Stockton, CA

Biographical Statement: Eileen Kogl Camfield is the Director of Writing Programs at the University of the Pacific where she oversees the Developmental Writing Program, Writing in the Disciplines, and the Student Writing Center. She can be reached at ecamfield@pacific.edu.
Abstract

This article is a reflective piece discussing the author's role as Director of University Writing Programs tasked with the responsibility of determining the success of a new composition course. By multiple assessment techniques, meaningful results were obtained after a single semester.

*Keywords*: writing assessment, college teaching, rubrics, writing self-efficacy
Fast and Fruitful: Effective Writing Assessment for Determining the Success of New Initiatives

Many writing program administrators experience a familiar conundrum: heed the cries for fast assessment results or engage in the lengthy and complicated process that meaningful review of student learning seems to entail? Such was my plight in the 2013-2014 academic year when my university deployed a new strategy for supporting incoming developmental writers. Beginning that fall, students whose writing-SAT (SAT-W) scores were between 450-500 were enrolled in a course known as Seminar Plus Studio (SPS), an interdisciplinary class that included a weekly supplemental 100-minute studio aimed at delivering targeted writing instruction, practice, and feedback. Instructors for these sections were hand-picked based on their extensive experience and reputations for excellence as writing teachers. As director of writing programs, my challenge was to determine if this curricular change effectively helped developmental writers transition into college-level writing. Add to that task the fact I needed results quickly – if we were not successful, we had to come up with an alternate plan, and the registrar needed enough lead time to get information in the catalogue by spring.

Fully aware that direct evidence of writing improvement is hard to procure after a single semester, I chose to conduct two concurrent assessment projects utilizing multiple but fairly simple techniques. The first examined skill development, and the second explored student growth in writing self-efficacy. What follows is a recounting of my intentions and my findings.

**First Approach: Traditional Writing Assessment**

The first form of assessment followed a traditional model. A total of 45 students provided samples of the first and last essays submitted during the semester. Thirty were randomly selected from the available population of developmental writers enrolled in the SPS course, and another 15 served as a kind of control group from the regular seminar sections (that
is, those sections that did not include the supplemental writing studio). Because my primary interest focused on how the developmental writers fared in SPS, the cohort of regular students functioned only as a point of comparison and was not intended to be statistically representational. Within the SPS group, after obtaining students’ SAT-W scores, I identified two cohorts of upper-band students (with scores between 480-500) and lower-band students (with scores between 450-470). This 30-student sample consisted of 23% of the 130 students assigned to the SPS course and, as such, was representational of the overall population of students in the developmental group.

The first and final essays of the semester were assessed following protocols in which student-author identification was blinded from nine independent raters (IRs) who used a traditional rubric (i.e., evaluating the students’ thesis, use of support, coherence, correctness and style) to holistically assign a numeric score, between 1 and 5, for each essay. While these raters were instructors of the freshman seminar course, no one was reading his/her own students’ essays. This meant these scorers were already deeply familiar with the assessment tool; however, efforts were still made to ensure inter-rater reliability using anchor papers at the start of the scoring process and again at the mid-day break to correct for any scoring drift. Each essay was initially read by two people, and in the case of more than a half-point difference in scores, was read by a third tie-breaker. Unfortunately, results of this initial assessment were somewhat disappointing. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, improvement in writing performance was extremely modest across all cohorts of students, meaning this assessment approach did not tell me very much about what students gained from the course.
True, I could see that the SPS students (circle-point and triangle-point lines) on average performed at the "C" level on their essays and that it was not quite as strong a performance as that produced by students in the regular sections of the course (square-point line). At best I could claim our intervention was a success because most students passed the class, but it was a tepid success because overall writing improvement was very modest. This was not so surprising because composition literature is clear that one semester is really too short a period of time to expect to see significant gains in writing performance (Carroll, 2002). Still, I was left with the dilemma of not really understanding what impact, if any, our studio intervention had on developmental writers.

**Second Approach: Scoring Writing Self-Efficacy**

In an attempt to gain a more complete picture of students' development as writers and to acknowledge that the act of writing involves much more than could be captured in a single demonstration of writing skill, *potential* writing performance was measured by looking at
students’ writing self-efficacy beliefs. My reasoning was based on the conclusions summed up by pioneers in this research field:

If writing difficulties result not only from an inability to solve writing problems, but also from one's own decision that one is unable to solve them, then one important step in improving writing would be to strengthen individuals' self-efficacy expectations about their writing ability (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985, p. 466).

Many subsequent studies have clearly linked writing self-efficacy beliefs to student achievement (Pajares, 2003; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989). Aware of this, as part of our work in the course in fall 2013, the instructional team established building students’ writing self-efficacy as one of our main course objectives. To determine our success, I conducted another assessment project, separate from the skill-focused one described previously. Students enrolled in the SPS sections completed a short in-class writing assignment that asked them to describe their strengths and weaknesses as writers and provide specific examples from their experiences to illustrate those claims. Students did this writing in the first and final weeks of class, as pre- and post-tests. These writing samples were scored by instructors not for writing skill but for evidence of writing self-efficacy, using a specially-designed rubric (see Appendix A). Elements on this rubric were directly derived from Bandura’s (1993) self-efficacy theory. Scorers spent several hours practicing with this rubric. It was revised and re-tested until inter-rater reliability was achieved. The mean scores from the pre- and post-tests can be observed in this graph.
Clearly, the slopes of the lines here are much steeper than the slopes in the IR-score graph (Fig. 1), meaning students appear to have made significant gains in writing self-efficacy even while their writing skills lagged behind. Qualitative analysis of the student narratives describing their strengths and weaknesses as writers further deepened my understanding. Initial themes of disengagement, fear of judgment, error conflation, and collapse in the face of adversity transformed into motifs of increased coping skills, personal agency, and critical distance. In terms of my original question as to whether our new course was successful, the self-efficacy data seem less equivocal: Students grew tremendously.

Thus, what this experience has taught us is that assessment results can, indeed, be obtained after a single semester. What’s more, these results can be especially meaningful when two studies and multiple techniques are employed. Results obtained from the traditional assessment identified a few growth areas in terms of skill development. The writing self-
efficacy qualitative results gave us information that could guide our pedagogical practice. A follow-up survey also revealed the teaching strategies our success depended on: cultivating a positive classroom climate, activating intrinsic student motivation, and forming a sense of cohort amongst students.

In the end, we discovered student attitudes about themselves as writers appear to be far more malleable than their actual writing performance levels may be. As attitudes are an important precursor to learning, instructors should employ teaching techniques that engender students’ positive beliefs in their writing capabilities to foster the kind of motivation that will ultimately result in improved performance. Not only are these outcomes attainable, they are assessable.
References


### Evidence of Efficacy:
The student is able to identify elements of effective writing AND demonstrates belief in his/her ability to use these elements successfully. While the student identifies writing problems, he/she may offer possible solutions to these problems. The student is aware of writing as a process and is able to prioritize specific future tasks. The student may comment on effective (or new) management of time to effectively fulfill an assignment.

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### Evidence of Mastery Experiences:
The student describes having had successful writing experiences at any level or point in the process (i.e. student does not have to have “mastered” all of writing to have had mastery experiences).

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### Evidence of Use of Positive Modeling:
The student refers to course readings and/or other writing as aspirational models used when approaching her/his own work. The student might also talk about the utility of peer and/or instructor feedback. The student might refer to his/her own successful previous writing as models as well.

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### Evidence of Reduced Anxiety and/or Increased Positive Affect:
The student uses positive or affirming adjectives to describe her/himself as a writer. Student may even express confidence and/or enjoyment of writing. Problems are accurately attributed but seen as specific and manageable (e.g. “I need to work on coming up with strong thesis statements.”), as opposed to global and catastrophic (e.g. “I am stupid.”).

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### Evidence of Empowerment or Positive Social Agency:
The student takes responsibility for his/her own writing, as opposed to blaming other factors for poor outcomes. The student may express willingness to “keep trying” and attributes success to improved writing ability rather than luck or external forces. The student may express “ownership” of the writing topics (e.g. “I write to express my ideas.”), rather than just writing to please the teacher. The student may describe proactively seeking feedback from readers and/or actively utilizing available writing support systems.

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**Score Pre-Diagnostic _______/15**  **Score Post-Diagnostic _______/15**