

# Writing Proficiency Assessment Research Project



**HURON  
UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE WRITING  
SKILLS CENTRE**



## *Writing Proficiency Assessment Research Project*



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## *Context of the Study*



### ***Rationale***

- Full-time enrolment in Ontario universities in 2008-2009 was nearly 364,000 students, compared to 330,374 in 2004-2005 (HEQCO, 2010).
- Charles MacArthur notes that "the National Assessment of Education Progress rated only...24 per cent of twelfth-grade students as proficient [in writing]" (2009).
- Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) has been administered to all first-year students at Huron University College since 1999.

### ***Assumptions not tested to date***

- that the WPA assists students to understand the features of good academic writing, and
- That feedback from the WPA encourages students to seek help with writing improvement from faculty, from the Writing Skills Centre, or from the credit-based writing classes.

# *Context of the Study*



## **Background**

- a liberal arts college that is affiliated with the University of Western Ontario
- Two Faculties:
  - **Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences** has approximately 1,000 students, all undergraduates, pursuing degrees in Psychology, Philosophy, Economics, English, French, Global Studies Political Science, or Business.
  - 12% international
  - **Faculty of Theology:** 120 students

## **Purpose of Our Study:**

To evaluate the real and perceived effectiveness of the Writing Proficiency Assessment and the Writing Skills Centre in helping students develop academic writing skills

# *The Writing Proficiency Assessment*



## ➤ **Tasks**

- *Read* an assigned article of 1200 words.
- *Summarize* the article in 6-8 sentences
- *Write an essay* from a prompt on an issue raised in the article

## ➤ **Measurement:**

The Overall Score: 1 – 6

Based on benchmarked descriptions of major / minor flaws in writing in three designated areas:

- ❖ *Essay Score*: 5 criteria on a benchmarked Likert Scale 1-5 (sum = 25)
- ❖ *Summary Score*: 4 criteria on a Likert Scale of 1-5 (sum = 20)
- ❖ *Grammar & Sentence Structure*: # of errors in grammar, punctuation, syntax/ vocabulary, sentence, and paragraph structure.

## ***Issues of construct validity in writing proficiency assessment***



### ***Format of the assessment***

Messick (1988):

"the *evidential* and *consequential* bases of construct validity have important implications for test interpretations and test use" (p.6).

Cumming (1997): The integration of writing with reading and listening materials for academic assessment tasks, and the use of multiple writing tasks increase the construct validity of these tests (p. 56).

Wiegler (2004): GSTEP: When GSTEP changed format from instructional prompts to readings, the passing rate rose from 75% to 90%.

# *Students' engagement with writing*



## ***Evaluation of Services:***

Bell (2000):

Need a regular and rigorous program of evaluation of writing services by choosing a method, or methods, that will provide valid and meaningful information about the effectiveness of the services offered.

Pemberton (2003) *self-efficacy*:

So many variables involved in any student's improvement in writing, assessing the growth of students' self-efficacy beliefs is the best way for universities to prove link between students' improvement in writing and improvement activities.

## ***Analysis of students' responses:***

Vygotsky (1978): *mediation*

Human beings appropriate cultural tools to reconstruct the meanings and functions of the tools through interaction and participation.

Prior (2006):

Written texts are mediated; they are not autonomous but are close to their socio-historic origins.

Lantolfe & Thorne (2007) *other regulation*:

“ ZPD reflects the difference in the level attained by students when they write with access to mediational tools and or in collaboration with more knowledgeable others, and the level attained when they write independently, without access to mediational tools or agents”

Hidi and Boscolo (2006) *self-regulation*:

“The self-regulated writer can successfully manage the complexity of writing” and can use “self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions .... to attain various literary goals, which include improving their writing skills...”

# *The Writing Proficiency Assessment Research Project*



## **Aims of study**

- 1. To determine whether a Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) administered to incoming first-year university students increases their actual and/ or perceived engagement with writing across the curriculum.*
- 2. To determine what other services students use to increase their skills in writing.*

## **Measurement Modes**

**Quantitative:** Compared real performance increase in skills through

- (1) Students' first-year WPA scores (WPA 1) and their fourth-year scores, (WPA 2) as pre-and post-test measures of proficiency
- (2) Performance on the WPA(2) with students' performance on essays in liberal arts courses.

**Qualitative:** Analysed perceptions of students about engagement through

- (1) Comments from a written survey students completed.
- (2) Oral interviews with students about how the writing services, particularly the WPA, impacted their writing skills.



## *Results of Quantitative Data Analysis*



- Students' *Overall Scores* on the WPA improved significantly between Year One and Year Four:  $t(20) = 3.31$ ,  $p = .003$ , two-tailed.
  - Students' *Summary Writing Scores* showed the most improvement, with significant improvements in Average Score:  $t(20) = 4.498$ ,  $p = .000$ , two-tailed; and all sub-scores (i.e. completeness of argument, organization, inclusion of important detail and clarity of expression).
  - Students' *Essay Writing Scores* showed significant improvement in the total score and the score for coherence.
  - Fourth-year WPA scores correlated significantly with average scores in essay courses :  $r = .462$ ,  $p = .02$ .
- BUT**
- There was no significant difference in *Grammar & Sentence Structure* scores between the two tests.

# *Results of Qualitative Data Analysis*



## *1. Context of remarks*

- Most of the 29 students surveyed (73%) have written more than 15 essays during their university careers;
- The majority of the group felt that the WPA was a useful assessment for them (77.3%)

## *2. Impact of WPA feedback*

- 32% spoke to someone; 23% visited the Writing Skills Centre, and 13.5% spoke to a professor.
- (32%) took no action.

## *Use of the Writing Centre*



- Over half of the students in the study (58%) have used the Centre; with 48% of these accessing this resource from 1 to 5 times; 10% attended 15 or more times
- 17% had never visited the Centre

*"With the writing services...that one can go with taking more time with writing instead of leaving it later, putting it off and then rushing at the end to hand it in ... getting it done soon enough that I could come to the writing centre and get the help that would have helped improve my mark."*

## *Misunderstandings about the function of the Writing Centre*



*"... when I finish my draft I would go to someone professional for help. If it's an academic idea, I would go to my professor; if it's merely writing I would go to the Writing Centre..."*

*"And I was under the impression that you had to have your paper done before you came to the writing services. And then I found out okay, no you don't have to, even if you just have your thesis or you just have, like kind of what you want to write or you have a couple of paragraphs done. Yeah, you can still come in and get feedback from it."*

## *Other Regulation: Impact of Professors*



A majority of the students (59%) report that professors are their primary influence in essay writing.

*"From my professors again, just when I do get a bad mark from them, going to see them more often, to even find out what they're looking for on the essay before I start writing it, not after I get it back."*

*"[It was in a first year] course where my professor said, 'You have a brilliant writing style'. ... there are certain words you tend to use ... so I tended to use them time and again. Then I keep going back to different professors you know, so I don't wear [them] out."*

# *Self-regulation*



*"I went into [the] professor's office and I had my binder and my notes. ... I just wanted to know, like how can I become more organized, how can [I] be a better learner, and we looked over a paper that I had just written."*

*"By far the biggest problem I've faced with a heavy load of essay courses is time management."*

## *Participation in a Writing Culture*



*"But then I grew, I think being exposed to the culture of writing and how professors are constantly bouncing off their ideas with others, and everyone is editing and it does not reflect poorly on oneself to have one's work edited because that is essentially where only good writing can come from. [It is] because you have to connect with an audience and you are ...the way to connect with an audience is to basically work with the audience to [reach] a superior product. So it was a definite paradigm shift and since then I've never ever been sceptical and reluctant to seek help for my writing."*

## *Lessons Learned*



- *The Janus Effect:* The interviews showed us that the WPA allows students to reflect, in a systematic way, on the skills that they brought with them from high school which they must refine in university.
- *The Power of Community:* The WPA encourages students to participate in the academic discourse community begins the dialogue about how to behave within that community. However, it's apparent that the students must move from *other-regulation* to *self-regulation*.
- *Redressing the Balance of Power:* Most students consider professors to be the primary source of feedback for the development of writing skills in specific content areas, but the services of the Writing Skills Centre help them expand those skills to all areas of academic discourse.
- *Myth-busting:* While some students value and visit the Writing Skills Centre regularly, others express concerns about its usefulness or hold misconceptions about its function in the academy. We need to do a better job of explaining and promoting our services within the student community.



## *Other Communities of Practice*



- *Immediate and long-term benefits* to developing good tools for writing assessment at the university level.
  - **Students :**
    - ✦ Become aware of the “changed rules” of writing in the university
    - ✦ May not immediately seek out help with their writing, so require “other-regulation”
    - ✦ As they mature, “other-regulation” turns to “self-regulation” (Writing Skills Centre).
  - **Administration**
    - ✦ Develop resources based on solid information on students’ skills.
  - **Professors (?) Needs further research**
    - ✦ reflect on what constitutes good writing in their disciplines
    - ✦ take responsibility for good writing practice in their content classrooms
- *Graduating students* have had time to reflect on their *development* of writing skills and are perhaps in a good position to give more balanced answers to some of the questions we regularly pose on surveys.

# Creating Appropriate Evaluation Tools



1. *Develop context-specific* assessments of writing that help develop the writing culture (high-stakes? low-stakes? # of participants? Academic context?).
2. *Determine capabilities*: what would you *like* to do? What are you *able* to do?
3. *Use available resources*: NSSE, data banks, former surveys.
4. *Promote your research* among faculty and students.

## ***Future Plans***

### More research

- Expand the data-base (>29).
- Interview Professors: What is the impact of Writing Services on their practice?

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