Learning is not a spectator sport.
Chickering and Gamson

Student Learning in Essential Studies: Where Do We Stand? UND Seniors’ Critical Thinking and Writing

Tom Steen, Director of Essential Studies

What are our students learning? How are they doing? How are we instructors doing with our students? All timely questions as conversations in higher education continue to shift and focus on issues of quality. Asking about quality means inquiring about our students’ learning. Asking these kinds of questions also means investigating the direct result of our instructional work. Quality questions of this sort are relatively new to the academy where examinations of quality have, in the past, focused more on “inputs” such as enrollment and indirect “outputs” such as students’ opinions of their courses. Higher education scholars point out that this shift is significant and relatively recent: “[T]his is part of a broader transformation in the intellectual culture of higher education, where attention to learning has been growing steadily over the past twenty years” (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone, 2011: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered, Jossey-Bass, 4).

The purpose of this piece in On Teaching is to report on one such quality inquiry into student learning at UND, focusing on two of the broad learning goals in our Essential Studies (ES) program. Recently, a group of faculty assessed senior students’ work from ES capstones and analyzed their use of two essential academic skills: written communication and critical thinking.

Putting ES into Action

Our development of the Essential Studies program at UND is a part of the national movement that Hutchings describes. ES came into being because some of our colleagues were asking these kinds of questions. Responding to those questions led to some key UND commitments. One was to re-examine and sharpen the kinds of learning that we wanted our students to achieve in general education. Another commitment was to investigate to what extent students were gaining that kind of learning. To move on the first commitment, we developed and implemented the new Essential Studies program. To move toward the second commitment, we designed a new assessment plan to collect information about ES student learning and to discuss the results.

We are now at a point where our early assessment results are coming in. Writing and critical thinking were selected for this “first look” at our students’ learning because they are both essential skills for success in career and community service, and because we have a large number of ES courses that have chosen these outcomes as their contribution to the program.

ES Assessment Method: Scoring Student Papers

In December 2011, 22 faculty members participated in a daylong “Assessment Workshop” where they reviewed over 80 samples of student work drawn from many different ES Capstone courses. Student papers were supplied, with student permission,
SPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING WITH WRITING: THE VALUE OF MEANINGFUL PEER REVIEW

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In many classes, students have the opportunity to peer review one another’s work and provide feedback; however, in many cases the feedback is either not in a format that is useful for students or students are afraid to offer commentary because they do not want to hurt the writer’s feelings. In either case, the constructive ideal of peer review is lost for both the reviewer and the reviewee.

In HUM 408, Writing Across Disciplines Capstone, we have instituted a peer review system to help students overcome both of these problems. This class is taught online and on-ground, but the exercise and intent are the same regardless of format. Initially, early in the semester, we have a class discussion about the students’ experiences with peer review and what they expect from the peer review process. This helps to alleviate any uncertainty and allows for a candid discussion on writing. The students then practice peer reviewing a “dummy” paper (I use a draft of a paper about Steven Jobs written by my daughter in ninth grade). The students are given the assignment parameters and the paper. Thus students practice on a neutral paper by an unknown person. That way the students have ample opportunity to address a variety of issues without being concerned about hurting someone’s feelings and to practice providing constructive commentary. They are provided with instructions adapted from Teaching Writing Online: How and Why by Scott Warnock (2009):

Please write a 200-word review of the paper using the criteria below as a guideline. The review will take the form of a memo that you will write in the beginning of the project file that you will include before the title. Do not forget to include your name. Please do not just answer the questions below, but craft the answers into a 200-word memo. You can use other information as well (per the other information this week, but please do not substitute them for these).

- Does the paper fulfill the assignment? Why or why not? (Hint: Get the assignment directions out to answer this question.)
- What is the writer’s purpose?
- Does the writer account for the audience effectively?
- What is the paper’s main idea/argument? Is it clearly worded?
- Are there counterarguments that the writer has not addressed?
- Are there particular places where the writer should have sources material?
- Does the paper flow? Are the paragraphs in a logical sequence? Do they relate to the main idea/thesis?
- Comment on the grammar and mechanics. While this is not the MAIN purpose of a Peer Review, it is important to note that recurring, glaring grammatical errors interfere with the paper’s intent.
- Name two main strengths of the paper.
- If this were your paper, name two ways in which you would improve it.

Once students have completed the “dummy” peer review, shared their evaluations with one another, and discussed the similarities and differences in their peer reviews, they are assigned to peer review groups for the entire semester, and they peer review each other’s papers as they are assigned. Students keep these same groups and work with these same guidelines for the entire term. This practice of peer review allows students to become comfortable with one another and to become more proficient at the process of peer review. Over the course of the semester, practicing the peer review process helps the students become more conscientious readers and writers and gives them permission to provide more than complimentary surface evaluations of their classmates’ writing.

Quick reminder: Summer Instructional Development Project (SIDP) proposals are due March 1, 2013

If you will be doing any course development work this summer, why not embrace best practices and get summer funding to do that work? SIDPs fund course development grounded in sound teaching practice. Designed to allow full time work on instructional development for four weeks during the summer, these Professorships provide a salary stipend of $4000. Work must go beyond normal course development and focus on enhancing student learning.

Complete information is available online at www.oid.und.edu
Faculty Instructional Development Committee Offers Grants

The Faculty Instructional Development Committee (FIDC), elected by the University Senate, provides support for course and curriculum development which goes beyond the means of individual faculty and academic units. FIDC grants may be used to travel for pedagogical development, travel to make a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) presentation, purchase instructional materials, or other projects related to teaching. To submit a proposal, you will find the necessary information on the OID website. The next deadline is December 3, at noon.

In the last fiscal year, the FIDC received 33 teaching related proposals, of which 26 were funded for a total of $24,791. Faculty who received funding represent 18 departments and programs in 6 colleges and Academic Affairs. Seventeen proposals were submitted for Flexible grant funding and 16 received funding. Flexible grants totaling $20,118.35 went to faculty from 10 departments representing 5 colleges and the VPAA’s Office.
by ES Capstone instructors over a two-semester period. Reviewers worked in two groups—one to assess critical thinking and the other to assess written communication.

Facilitated by Joan Hawthorne, Director of Assessment and Regional Accreditation, and Anne Kelsch, Director of Instructional Development, the reviewing teams used the UND ES assessment rubrics for these two learning outcomes (see the Essential Studies website: Assessment Rubrics for ES Courses). The teams began with a “norming” exercise during which each reviewer learned to use their assigned rubric and then calibrated so that their application of the rubric would be reliable and trustworthy.

(Interested readers can learn more about the norming procedure from the full report of the Assessment Workshop; available by request from the Essential Studies Office).

The rest of the day was spent in scoring the student work: papers and reports based on major assignments in the capstone courses. Scores, based on the rubrics (each rubric uses a 0-4 scoring system), were reported and summarized. At the end of the day, the review teams also discussed the scoring process itself as well as their general impressions of UND student learning as reviewed.

Here is a summary of their findings.

**Critical Thinking: Assessment Results from ES Capstones**

Two conclusions seem clear. First, the majority of senior students are successfully demonstrating some kinds of critical thinking skills. For example, only a small number of student work products were scored at the bottom of the range on Knowledge & Comprehension, and even those low scores were not at the lowest level (only 9 scores out of 127 scorings were at the 1.0 level; none were at the bottom at 0 or 0.5; the rubric has a maximal score of 4.0).

Second, even though the majority of scores were in the upper levels, there were also a significant number of senior students who, even though nearing graduation, failed to demonstrate a level of critical thinking likely to be deemed acceptable. Among the 57 papers scored, mean scores for 8 papers were in the lower third of possible scores and only 11 were in the top third. In the category of Evaluation & Conclusions (in the rubric), the score of 0 was assigned by at least one scorer 19 different times.

These results, then, tell us a “good news/bad news” story about critical thinking. They demonstrate that there is strong overall achievement and, at the same time, significant room for improvement.

**Written Communication: Assessment Results from ES Capstones**

Overall, this analysis of written communication scores shows that there is significant room for improvement in this area and the need for improvement extends across the four criterion areas in the rubric: Sense of Purpose, Synthesis/Analysis/Evaluation, Guidance for Readers, and Clarity & Conventions. On the other hand, the results also indicate that there is no single area of urgent need. This may create special challenges for improving written communication competency since the data suggest that individual student papers exhibited patterns of strengths and weaknesses that were quite varied.

However, the results also show that very few students are extremely weak across the board. Only three pieces of student work reviewed might be considered as falling into that category (i.e., total mean score of 4.0 or below). This number constitutes less than 1% (actually about 0.7%) of the total number of students whose work was scored. So while there is considerable room for improvement and that efforts will likely need to span all four criteria, there is also some reason for satisfaction with written communication scores.

**Next Steps: Closing This Loop and Opening Up Others**

Since this was the first of several assessment analyses, we need to exercise caution about overreliance on these particular results. At the same time, they do give us an early picture of student learning in ES. With that caution in mind, here are some suggestions for how we might move the ES program forward, divided into improving student learning on these two outcomes and the assessment process itself.

**On the Improvement of Writing and Critical Thinking.**

1. One relatively simple, “low cost” strategy might be to ask students and instructors in ES capstones to sharpen their efforts in doing the writing and critical thinking in key assignments (e.g., culminating projects, capstone research papers, etc.). Most capstones are already conducting direct assessments on these two essential outcomes, so simply heightening awareness and increasing effort might “step up” the quality of student work.

2. In writing, the results suggest across the board strategies, aimed at refining the writing of all seniors. With writing assignments and assessments already in place in UND capstones, additional time and activities are not needed. If instructors raised their expectations, even minimally, on the quality of writing, and reminded students that writing “does matter,” the results might prove very positive. A second strategy would be for “C” course instructors to make direct use of the UND written communication rubric—have students use it in self-analyses and peer reviews of writing work and have instructors use it to conduct their reviews/assessment of students’ writing.

3. To improve student work in critical thinking, the effort could be targeted at the “hot spots”—the students who demonstrate weak critical thinking. The results suggest
that this is a small number of students, but still significant enough for us to care about and try to improve, especially because these underperforming students are seniors and ready to move into careers and communities. Hot spotting might involve:

- An early course assessment of critical thinking to identify students who need help
- Improvement strategies, outside of class but directly associated with course projects and papers, that are designed to improve critical thinking. Peer mentors or coaches might be one approach that “C” course instructors could use within their course structure. Peer tutoring is a pedagogical strategy that had very positive effects in learning improvement in a variety of outcomes.

4. Although these suggestions are targeted at ES capstones in particular, connecting other ES faculty with those who teach “C” courses might serve as a way to enlarge the discussion. Gathering instructors who share the same ES goal to discuss common learning problems would be one step. Connecting them with our on-campus expertise (e.g., the Writing Across the Curriculum program, Bush Teaching Scholars) would be a strong second step toward developing successful strategies for dealing with those problems.

**About the Assessment Process: What to Do and How to Do It**

- Discuss these results with faculty groups. Two groups that could make a difference quickly: a) ES Capstone instructors, and b) the review teams who conducted these assessments.
- Compare these results, based on scoring student work, with results from the next administration of the College Learning Assessment (CLA). The CLA is a frequently used standardized test series that assesses these same two learning outcomes. Using the CLA will provide a second look at our students’ learning.
- Expand the scoring sessions so that they become part of annual ES assessment work—this event was a first try, and review team members volunteered their time. The goal of an annual process would be to assess the other learning outcomes to provide a fuller picture of where our students stand in terms of the full ES program.

**A Final Note**

Inquiry into student learning on their writing and critical thinking reminds us of how much our work in teaching is interdependent. Even though the work here was taken from capstone courses housed in particular units, it’s obvious that these students learned and practiced writing and thinking in multiple places and times. These essential intellectual skills are crosscutting learning outcomes that require constant use and practice, and they require careful retuning when students’ intellectual challenges increase in complexity. Put another way: examining senior student work reminds us how important it is that we work in concert as our students move from one course to another, from discipline to discipline, and from one problem to the next.
Academic Integrity and Take-Home Exams: An Open Conversation
Tuesday, December 4, 12:30 p.m. - 1:30 p.m. (register by Friday, November 30 at noon)

This session take place in the Badlands Room of the Union. Visit the Office of Instructional Development online (www.oid.und.edu) to register. For information contact Jana Lagro at 7-4998 or jana.lagro@und.edu.