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## Grading Changes after a Writing Faculty Workshop

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Grading Changes after a Writing Faculty Workshop

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### **Abstract**

After a workshop on student outcomes for the first-year writing course, the 28 faculty participants discussed the implications of “Development” for critical thinking. This case study of one college’s participatory exercise in improving writing found that although the RWU faculty lacked consensus on the definition, simply discussing topic of “Development” may have had the unintended effect of fewer A grades in the following semester. Unfortunately, the percentage of A grades ascended in the subsequent semesters to suggest that without reinforcement, faculty returned to grade inflation.

### **Introduction**

A small, private college in the northeast, Roger Williams University has a freestanding Department of Writing Studies that has recently engaged in assessment. In 2005, RWU’s Writing Faculty met in a Summer Workshop to discuss the final portfolio results for three semesters of Writing 102 (a first-year course). The grades were determined holistically by instructors’ use of a Portfolio Assessment Sheet that was scaled with percents awarded to different criteria. Grades ranged from A, B, C, and C- to NP (Not Passing). For the students, the final portfolio grade was high-stakes because it contributed to 40% of the course grade, and of this, “Development” comprised 30% of the Portfolio grade.

The Portfolio Assessment Sheets (PAS) help maintain the Writing Studies’ goal to develop “students’ abilities to articulate critical analyses” (RWU; 2008), to secure programmatic consistency, and to facilitate faculty development. With these goals in mind, the first author reported the results and facilitated a discussion about the outcome of “Development” when she served as Department Chair. Although a specific definition of “critical thinking” was problematic, faculty agreed that thinking skills were included under our programmatic outcome of “Development of ideas” which occurs when “The writer advances a credible, well-reasoned argument by providing sufficient support.” Further, some participants showed concern that 43% of the students received an A in Fall 04. Although the original intention was to discuss methods of encouraging students to amplify their thinking, the unintended result was a concern about grade inflation.

The summer workshop discussion itself may have influenced the trend towards lower grades in the next semester, Fall 2005. As a follow-up, the current authors continued recording the grades in “Development” during the next three fall semesters with an eye on the percentage of A grades.

This research asked the following question: *Without faculty reinforcement, did the original decline in A grades after the workshop remain constant over the next several semesters?*

### **Literature Review**

Although most writing program assessments have multi-purposeful and cyclical goals, some are to disseminate results to teachers to facilitate students' learning (NTCE; 2004) and to insure consistency in classroom instruction (ADE; 1993). When discussed cooperatively, writing assessment can ascribe agency to the instructors (Slevin, 2001), initiate faculty development, and improve the curriculum as well as the program (Huot & Schendel, 2002).

As a part of some newer assessments, one important objective for a writing program has been to integrate the concept of critical thinking. Although defined variously (*cf.* Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004), a focus on "critical thinking" can help the students develop their ideas beyond the superficial. For instance, Blattner and Frazier (2002), affirmed that further purposes of critical thinking included "challenging students to improve their critical thinking abilities, and informing teachers about their students' critical thinking capabilities and how the instruction in their classrooms might have contributed to that development" (p. 2-3). Further, Condon and Kelly-Riley (2004) propose that assessment affirms whether we actually test the values and competencies we claim.

In addition to thinking skills, instructors are often concerned with the possibility of grade inflation. For instance, Sooner (2000), found that adjunct instructors tend to award higher grades in business classes. Kezim, Pariseau, and Quinn (2005), reported that grades given by adjuncts as compared to nontenured or tenured faculty in a small private, northeast college tended to escalate over a 20-year period.

### **The Methods**

#### **A. The Original Study of the Data**

Assessment began with the review of the Fall 04 scores. The methodology for assessing the grade of Development from the PAS was straightforward, a simple average. In the case of a split grade, such as an A/B, the lower of the two was used. Throughout the data period, instructors varied somewhat, with the change of a few adjuncts, but retaining a ratio of about 70-75% of part to full time. Of the adjuncts, about 40-50% had taught at RWU consistently for three or more years. On the other hand, the placement procedures, the primary texts, and the Portfolio Grading Criteria remained constant. The quality of incoming freshman improved slightly with a 2% increase from the verbal SAT of 1072 in 2004 to 1095 in 2007.

Nonetheless, a couple of variables must to be taken into account: Some students may have neglected to submit portfolios, opted out, or retrieved them prior to collation of the data. While lack of "Development" did not alone determine whether the each portfolio passed, the results suggested re-dedication to this area for the faculty and for further study of the program. In summer 2005, an all-faculty workshop was planned so as to help the lower-scoring students improve their thinking skills that contributed to students' "good" writing and good grades.

#### **B. The Summer Workshop**

After all the Fall 04 grades and several outcomes were discussed, a focus on “Development of ideas” followed. Faculty presumed (wrongly or rightly) that this programmatic outcome included aspects of critical thinking. Our program’s definition of Development is that of a “credible, well-reasoned argument...[with] sufficient support.” The topic of Development was chosen, in part, to deter fixation on surface errors and to address a recurring problem as had been reported anecdotally by Writing Studies faculty and by those who teach in our General Education Program. To help students develop ideas beyond the superficial (Condon & Riley, 2004), the workshop leader introduced a sample student essay and asked that focus groups use methods suggested by our textbooks to encourage the student to think more deeply. However, one unexpected result was that in the collective discussion, faculty preferred to focus on the high number of A grades as a problem of grade inflation. This new concern led to further assessment of A grades in subsequent years.

### C. The Follow-Up

After the workshop, the percentages of A grades Fall 04-Fall 07 were calculated. The numbers included a population of 243 students in Fall 04; 432 in Fall 04; 530 in Fall 06; and 415 in Fall 07. Only fall grades were used for consistency.

### Results

As shown in the table below, in Fall 04 the percentage of A grades retreated from 43% to 18% right after the workshop, but later, the percent of A grades rose steadily to 38% in Fall 07.

[Table]

### Discussion

In the data analyses themselves, the RWU Writing Studies’ use of Portfolio Outcomes provided an overview of how WTNG 102 students were faring in Development. The Summer Workshop focus on this outcome engaged the faculty’s intellectual interests through discussion (Slevin, 2001), and facilitated faculty development by incorporating “critical inquiry, close study, constant review, and attention to consequences” (p. 301). Thus, additional purposes were to embrace the faculty’s sense of responsibility for and commitment to the program’s quality (Slevin, 2001) and to open alterations in faculty’s “cognitive skills, social skills” or attitude changes (Davis, Scriven, & Thomas, 1987, p. 9).

Even though faculty were reluctant to define “critical thinking” especially since even specialists and theorists do not agree, the faculty did acknowledge that the outcome of Development was a necessary aspect of or akin to the more general concept of “critical analysis” as stated in the Writing Studies Writing Studies’ goals (RWU, Writing Studies, 2008). After collaborating on a sample No Passing essay, the faculty agreed that real thinking was at a minimum even though the student had followed the superficial directions. To reassure the others, one tenured faculty member said that although she was unable to define critical thinking exactly, she knew it when she saw it, and others agreed. Voiced by one participant as “Students need to dwell on thinking,” RWU writing instructors continually worry about how to get students to reflect upon their ideas or how to think more deeply.

In addition, several adjunct instructors volunteered that the high percentage of A grades (43%) suggested grade inflation. Their concern reflected what is known empirically and through research. In addition to a finding that adjunct instructors tended to award higher grades (Sooner, 2000), adjuncts' grades had a propensity to escalate over a 20 year period in contrast to nontenured or tenured faculty in a small private, northeast college (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). That the RWU adjuncts themselves initiated the discussion on grade inflation confirms their devotion to the program and their mutual trust (WPANCTC; 2008).

Follow-up data analysis found that grading for Development changed after the workshop. In F 05, the A grades retreated from 43% to 18% to suggest that the focus on critical thinking during the workshop influenced the instructors to grade more rigorously the next semester (even though the B grades rose simultaneously from 33% to 50%). While it may be simplistic to attribute the dip of 18% to the effects of merely one workshop, the results suggest that instructors became more aware of the importance of critical thinking (however defined) and more sensitive to grade inflation, so they practiced more rigorous grading, especially at the highest level.

One year later in Fall 06, however, the curve reversed. The A grades rose from 18% to 26%, to suggest that instructors had relaxed their standards for the highest grade. Two years later in Fall 07, the A grades climbed again, this time to 38%. At the same time, the B grades rose 4% while the C grades declined 9%.

Granted, the rise in A grades may have been related to the 2% overall increase in Verbal SAT scores during the period, however the shift upward more likely suggests that without positive programmatic reinforcement of grading criteria, instructors return to their grading habits. This trend corroborates with Rushing and James' (1972) conclusions when studying college students and the influence of peer or supervisory pressure: A lack of reinforcement – whether facilitated by student peers or administrators – leads to poor performance later. But now, similarly, a lack of reinforcement leads to a return of the faculty's original grading habits even though they once agreed otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

After the RWU Summer Workshop to encourage instructors to discuss critical thinking, the A grades on Development immediately declined. However, without reinforcement, faculty tended to return to their grading practices. Therefore, to sustain any change in faculty grading and to suppress potential grade inflation, assessment practitioners should engage in some sort of faculty follow-up in further meetings, messages, or workshops.

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