

Using the WPA Outcomes Statement to Assess Students' Course Portfolios

Proposed Project

Since 1995, we have asked students to construct portfolios in our first-year courses so that they can begin to see the breadth and depth of their learning in the courses. During the 1997-1998 academic year, one of the principal investigators of the proposed study participated in on-line discussions of the Outcomes Statement (OS) developed by members of WPA and CCCC. In the spring of that year, at the annual CCCCs meeting in Chicago, he participated in the day-long workshop in which participants revised a draft of the Outcomes Statement. As he thought about the Outcomes Statement and the portfolios that students construct in our courses, he realized that combining the two would allow the Composition Program to provide evidence that our students are accomplishing much in first-year composition.

In the summer of 1998, the two of us collaborated with several other colleagues to link the Outcomes Statement and students' portfolio work. That is, we constructed a portfolio assignment that asked students to use the items in the OS to reflect on their work in the first-year courses. Since then, we have revised the assignment each semester, and there are slightly different versions for each of the first-year courses.

Teachers in our large program (roughly 145 teachers; 13,000 students; 600 sections annually) regularly use portfolios in our courses; they reflect fairly thoughtfully on the uses of portfolios; and they even rave about the learning evident in the portfolios. Further, students in their reflective cover letters for their portfolios note that the portfolios offer them surprising insights into the skills and knowledge that they developed.

This is all well and good, but we have yet to examine students' portfolios in some systematic way to assess students' learning program-wide. We need to engage in such an assessment to demonstrate the value of our program to the university's upper administrators, to the board of regents, and to the legislature. Further, such a large-scale assessment at such a large Research I University could provide useful data to WPAs at other institutions.

We are asking for a WPA Year 2000 Research Grant to help us begin this large-scale assessment of learning outcomes evident in students' course portfolios. We believe that once we get the assessment begun that we can seek institutional funding to continue and to expand the assessment.

In the proposed study, we will focus on portfolios that students construct in our two-semester sequence for basic writers. We feel that this focus is important and timely because of current national debates about the appropriateness of offering courses to students who are perceived to be poorly prepared to do university-level work. (Of course, the acrimonious discourse of the debate about CUNY course offerings is currently the most publicized portion of that national debate. Each week the Chronicle of Higher Education, as well as the popular press, includes some stories about CUNY.)

Data Collection and Analysis: Each spring, approximately 450-500 students complete our two-semester basic-writing sequence, and each of them constructs a portfolio each semester. We plan to randomly select 5 portfolios from each of the 20 or so sections of the second-semester course for analysis. We will train two graduate research assistants to "mine" the portfolios for

evidence of the learning outcomes described in the WPA/CCCC Outcomes Statement. We will ask the RAs to label each instance.

Before we ask those RAs to read through the 100+ portfolios, we will design a "Guideline for Reading" the portfolios, which in essence translates the language of the OS to what is exemplified in the students' portfolio.

Here's an example (and we're just brainstorming now--we'd have to construct the actual Guidelines): the OS lists that ". . . students should know how to use multiple drafts to improve their texts . . ." Our assignment translates that OS concept into a prompt:

· What materials do I need to include to demonstrate that I can use multiple drafts to improve my text . . . ?

Our Guidelines, then, would ask the research assistants to note what the portfolio "does" with this prompt, something along this line:

Multiple drafts are

_____ mentioned

_____ examples of more than one draft are provided

_____ examples of more than one draft, with changes highlighted, are provided

Here's another example: the OS indicates that students should ". . . be able to document primary and secondary sources appropriately . . ." Our assignment translates this concept into the prompt:

· What examples can I provide to show I'm able to document primary and secondary sources appropriately?

Our Guidelines might ask

Documentation of sources is

_____ mentioned

_____ examples of how primary sources are cited were provided

_____ examples of how secondary sources are cited were provided

We will ask the graduate students to work together (that is, at the same time), so that if what's in the portfolio does not exactly match our scoring guide, they can collectively be able to decide how to interpret that section of the portfolio. We do not see our Guidelines as a "scoring" guide of some kind, but rather as a research-gathering implement to show us how the OS concepts are actually exemplified in real portfolios. We will use appropriate statistical tests to determine differences in the level of demonstration that exists in students' portfolios.

We assume that the results of this study would be of interest to all members of WPA. With that in mind, we plan to present the results at the annual summer WPA conference and/or at the WPA session(s) at the annual MLA conference. Of course, we also plan to submit the results for publication in WPA: Writing Program Administration.

Timetable: We plan to gather a random sample of students' portfolios at the end of the semester in May of 2000. We plan to complete the data analysis in the summer of 2000. We will spend the fall of 2000 writing the results of the study for publication and for presentation at the CCCC and WPA conferences. (Criteria #4)

Budget

We wish to hire two graduate research assistants to read students' course portfolios to "mine" them for evidence of achieving the learning outcomes described in the Outcomes Statement developed by members of WPA and CCCC.

\$300 pay two RAs to be trained by Principle Investigators (PI) to do close reading of students' portfolios (\$10 per hour x 15 hours x 2 RAs)

\$1700 pay two RAs to do close reading of 100-125 students' portfolios

(\$10 per hour x 85 hours x 2 RAs)

\$2000 Total