
Time to Write

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The Verbal Assessment Project: Working with Teachers to Ensure Quality Instruction

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In July of 1997, I was asked to take over as Verbal Assessment Coordinator for the University of Wisconsin. For a number of reasons, I accepted. Faculty entering their tenure decision year are perhaps compliant by nature. At the same time, I value communication instruction, and I have deep respect for faculty and instructors delivering the general education communication courses. And as a social scientist, the problem of verbal assessment was a challenge that intrigued me. Thus, I took charge of solving the verbal assessment puzzle.

Much of my first year as Verbal Assessment Coordinator was devoted to figuring out what verbal assessment is supposed to be about. After consulting extensively with people who had been involved in previous verbal assessment activities, I can now offer some answers to the most common questions about verbal assessment.

What is verbal assessment?

This question seems a simple starting point, but perceptions of verbal assessment vary dramatically. Some faculty are concerned that verbal assessment involves an evaluation of teaching performance. Others dismiss assessment as busy work designed to appease the Board of Regents, the

North Central Association, or legislators. However, verbal assessment is neither a regulatory mechanism nor a superficial exercise. Instead, verbal assessment is a program of inquiry designed to provide constructive insight into the operation of the general education communication courses. Of course, this definition raises several other questions.

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Why engage in verbal assessment? A number of forces, external as well as internal, have promoted verbal assessment at the University of Wisconsin. In the early 1990s, the Board of Regents issued a mandate requiring UW System schools to assess students' educational gains. More recently, the North Central Association's guidelines and actions at peer institutions have made clear that the re-accreditation of the university will depend on an appropriate and integrated university assessment plan. The Verbal Assessment Project has emerged as an important part of the university's overall assessment efforts. The Verbal Assessment Project

has also been guided by more intrinsic concerns, most notably the implementation of the general education requirements in communication. With the instantiation of the Communication-A and -B courses, the university has become substantially invested in developing students' communication, writing, and information literacy. Thus, the Verbal Assessment Project primarily exists to document the product of these efforts and to inform the evolution of the general education program in communication.

What are the goals of verbal assessment? The specific goals of the Verbal Assessment Project have been revised considerably over the last two years. Prior to 1997, the Verbal Assessment Project was comprised primarily of annual portfolio studies. In each year, Professor Marty Nystrand of the English Department collected portfolios of student writing within three or four advanced writing-intensive courses. Samples of writing from student portfolios were evaluated by readers to gain insight into the authors' abilities. These studies provided detailed information about individual student performance.

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The Verbal Assessment Project

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Since then, the focus of the Verbal Assessment Project has shifted to evaluating the general education communication program, rather than student performance within particular courses. Broadly speaking, the objectives of general education instruction in communication address two types of student outcomes. First, students should manifest improved *skills* in writing, oral communication, and information literacy. In addition, students should develop *attitudes* about the process of writing, speaking, and accessing information resources that promote the implementation of those skills.

What is the Verbal Assessment Project agenda?

The structure of the general education communication requirements suggests three points at which student outcomes can be examined: (a) after Comm-A instruction, (b) after Comm-B instruction, and (c) as students approach graduation. Whereas the first two points address the effective implementation of the components of the communication program, the latter speaks to the cumulative impact of general education communication instruction. Consequently, the long-term agenda for the Verbal Assessment Project involves a variety of studies to assess students' *skills* and *attitudes* after Comm-A instruction, after Comm-B instruction, and at graduation.

The first study conducted by the Verbal Assessment Committee focused on documenting baseline attitudes among UW college seniors. When I first took over the project, I learned that no representative baseline of students' skills or attitudes had been established prior to the implementation of the general education program. Establishing an appropriate skill baseline was simply too much to accomplish in the time available; therefore, we focused on documenting attitudes about communication, writing, and information literacy among students who had matriculated prior to the implementation of the general education requirements. In the spring of 1998, a random sample of 523 seniors completed a phone survey focused on communication, writing, and information management beliefs, attitudes, and anxieties.

Current assessment activities are intended to provide insight into students' writing skills upon completing a

Comm-B course. To this end, a random sample of Comm-B instructors will be asked to participate in the study. The students in those courses will complete a brief in-class survey to screen participants for inclusion in the final sample. Instructors will be asked to share copies of final student papers, which will be rated according to specific criteria by a team of trained readers. In addition, sampled students and instructors will be asked to complete a short survey at the end of the semester. Results of this effort should highlight the ways in which the Comm-B course is functioning effectively and where students' writing skills may need further development.

How will verbal assessment affect faculty and instructors? This question needs to be addressed in two ways. First, the Verbal Assessment Project does not examine the performance of individual instructors. At no time will this committee report data that allow anyone to evaluate those people who teach the general education courses. Although information about how general education courses are functioning, in general, and insights into student outcomes may be useful to faculty and instructors implementing particular courses, the Verbal Assessment Project will be unable to provide more specific feedback.

At the same time, the success of verbal assessment on this campus requires the support of the UW teaching and learning community. In responding to the Board of Regents' mandate, Testing and Evaluation Services dutifully contacted a large random sample of students and asked them to complete a one-hour writing test; of the more than 1800 students sampled, approximately 200 completed the test. With this kind of student cooperation, we've realized that the majority of assessment activities will need to be conducted within the context of particular courses. Faculty and instructors can expect the Verbal Assessment Committee to prioritize unobtrusive assessment activities, and I hope that everyone will appreciate the need to collaborate in the verbal assessment effort.

For me, taking on this project has been at times daunting, always challenging, and undoubtedly time consuming. Through it all, however, I try to stay focused on a few simple truths. Assessment isn't really anything new. Teachers engage in assessment all the time--when we evaluate students, reconsider an assignment, or reflect on a class exercise. The institutionalization of these activities, though, sometimes gives good teachers pause; they expect the resulting institution to be at best inequitable, and at worst maybe dangerous. But the Verbal Assessment Committee simply takes the same principles that good teachers espouse and applies them to the general education program. Through a variety of assessment activities, we will reflect on student outcomes and course design to provide constructive insight into the University of Wisconsin's pedagogical mission. ■

Time to Write

Time to Write is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Correspondence should be addressed to *Time to Write*, L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum, Dept. of English, UW-Madison, Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706. We can also be reached via phone at 608-263-3823 or via e-mail:

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Four Ways You Can Support Your Comm-B & Writing-Intensive Course TAs

Rebecca S. Nowacek, English

With so many Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses taught in a lecture-discussion section format, TAs are often on the front lines of implementing the general education requirements and must juggle a multitude of responsibilities. To succeed, TAs need strong and consistent support from their lecturers. As I've conversed with experienced TAs in departments across L&S—including Biocore, English, ILS, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology—it has become clear to me that there is a strong consensus among TAs on the following four tips as the most important things lecturers can do to support TAs' work.

WORK WITH YOUR TAs TO DEVELOP WELL-PACED ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCES

TAs who had the chance to meet with their lecturers well before the semester began unanimously stressed how important such a meeting was. If you are developing the writing assignments for your TAs, you can use this time to explain what your expectations and sequencing ideas are so TAs can coach students on the assignments appropriately. Alternatively, if you allow or expect TAs to design their own assignments, this meeting gives them the time and support to do so.

Expecting TAs to design a sequence of assignments on their own only days before the semester begins, many TAs report, is unrealistic. One effective way to guide your TAs while still allowing them the freedom to draw on their own expertise is to outline a *potential* sequence of assignments. Your TAs can then either adopt the outline wholesale or use it as a model to develop their own assignments.

Also, allow enough time between

papers during the semester to avoid "the domino effect": if TAs don't have enough time to return one paper before students start writing the next, the TAs' schedules can quickly fall out of synch with your intended schedule.

Similarly, because it is impossible to anticipate before the semester begins how much guidance students will need as they undertake the assigned writing, your TAs will benefit from some flexibility in the pace of the semester. One way to ensure flexibility is to leave multiple "TBA" sections throughout the semester that your TAs can schedule according to their students' needs.

To succeed, TAs need strong and consistent support from their lecturers.

WORK TO CREATE A COMMUNITY OF TEACHERS

By meeting with your TAs to discuss the hows, whys, and whens of the writing assignments, you're already starting to build such a community. Other ways to build strong working relationships between you and your TAs: If you can, arrange for your TAs to have offices near each other and near you. Build a file of TA materials (handouts, writing assignments, assignment sequences, etc.); you can share these materials with future TAs (especially less-experienced ones) and explain how such exercises support your course goals.

Make it clear to your TAs that you support them. Consider having regular staff meetings (perhaps 30 minutes before or after lecture once a week) to encourage your TAs to "cross-fertilize" their ideas and

communicate their concerns and successes with you. Talk about grading with your TAs--perhaps having a staff meeting to "calibrate" grading standards--and make it clear that you will not undermine the TAs if students come to contest their grades.

Whenever possible, give your TAs plenty of notice regarding paper deadlines, staff meetings, etc.

EMPHASIZE THE EXPERIENCES AND STRENGTHS OF YOUR TAs

Just as it is important for your TAs to know you support their work, it is important for your students to know that you value the TAs. Too often, students see TAs as merely the distributors of handouts. When appropriate, explain to your students that the TAs were specially selected because of their abilities and experience. Even "little" things--like referring to your TAs as "instructors" rather than "teaching assistants"--can shape the way students perceive the role and worth of TAs. Consider inviting a TA to give a guest presentation or even a full lecture on her area of expertise. Overall, simply convey to your students that you and your TAs are a team and that you value the work that TAs do with students.

IN YOUR LECTURES, STRESS THE VALUE OF WRITING

Students take what the lecturer says seriously. Therefore, it sends a powerful message if you explain to your students that you believe in the value of the large amount of reading and writing they do in sections. Consider bringing in or talking about your own drafts, stressing that professional writers work on and revise their writing, evaluating class readings as examples (successful or otherwise) of disciplinary writing, or having someone from the Writing Center come do an "outreach." ■

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Brownbag Workshops on Teaching with Writing

The L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum invites faculty and instructional staff to our spring 1999 brownbag workshops on teaching with writing.

“Making Student Peer Review Work”

Wednesday, March 3, 12:15 - 1:30 p.m., 6191 Helen C. White Hall.

Tired of being the first--and only--reader of your students' papers? Would you like your students to help each other to become better writers? Concerned about how to make peer review really work? Come to this workshop and learn how to incorporate peer review into your course, how to sell students on the benefits of peer review, and how to deal with the common problems students encounter when doing peer review.

“Designing and Teaching a Communication-B or Writing-Intensive Course”

Friday, April 9, 12:15 - 1:30 p.m., 7191 Helen C. White Hall.

Are you currently teaching a Communication-B or Writing-Intensive course? Preparing to teach one? Thinking about proposing one? Join us for a discussion of how to design effective Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses--courses that will help students learn course content and improve their writing abilities. This workshop will focus on integrating writing into course material, designing effective writing assignments, and coaching students to succeed with writing. Two professors will share wisdom they've gained from teaching recent Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses.

Although advance registration isn't required for these workshops, if you're planning to attend we'd appreciate your registering so that we can have enough handouts. For more information, or to register for either workshop, contact Brad Hughes, Director of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum: 263-3823 or bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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If you would like us to add a colleague's name to our mailing list or to remove yours, just complete this sheet and send it to Rebecca Nowacek, English Dept., H.C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., or send an email to rcschoen@facstaff.wisc.edu.

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