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Articulation or Collaboration?

I n this paper, I want to demonstrate that change only occurs when faculty from across segments collaborate as equal partners. Articulation agreements, on the other hand, operate on the belief that if universities establish the standards they want their colleagues in community colleges or K–12 schools to meet, change will somehow occur. As an English as a second language (ESL) practitioner, I have found that collaborative work among different segments is more likely to result in equivalency of curricula and standards. Over several years, San José State University (SJSU) has worked with a number of regional community colleges on projects in which we examined similarities and differences among our language programs for language minority students with the goal of developing curriculum at participating institutions.

The first project,"Beyond Articulation: A Regional Approach to Course Planning and Content Mastery in Freshman Composition" (1987-8),[1] developed a fully elaborated syllabus for students unprepared for SJSU's upper division writing program (Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement [GWAR]), which consists of a writing screening test (Writing Skills Test [WST]) and an upper division writing workshop (100W) taught across the curriculum. The course developed is for students who fail the WST (primarily ESL students) and for any who know they are unprepared for upper division writing. The second project, "Common Assessment of Writing Skills in Second Level Composition Courses: A Model for Regional Planning" (1989-90)[2] examined the WST itself, assembling a team of faculty from SJSU and its service area. These faculty assessed the proposed American College Testing Computerized Assessment and Placement Programs (ACT CAPP) exam for possible use as SJSU's WST. Through this collaboration we were able to reach common agreement on the writing standards required of students entering upper division work at SJSU.

These two projects resulted in continuing dialogue between SJSU composition faculty and those in service area community colleges. From these dialogues we found that, while we had reached some agreement on common standards at the point of transfer, we had not looked at the other end of the curriculum—prefreshman composition (pre-1A), in particular courses for ESL students. Thus, in 1991 we engaged in another project, "ESL Curriculum Development for Prefreshman Composition,"[3] that focused on how best to prepare ESL students for college-level writing. There was and still is a pressing need to ensure adequate written communication skills among our foreign-born students because (a) they represent 33% of SJSU's student population (Murray, Nichols, & Heisch, 1992), and (b) they fail the WST at far higher rates than native English-speaking students. For example, 50% of Vietnamese fail compared with 5.7% of native English speakers (Murray & Nichols, 1992). Further, we saw a need to develop consistent entry-exit standards across community colleges and the CSU pre-freshman composition classes: Students transferring from a community college to SJSU and students who began as freshmen at SJSU should, we felt, have all reached the same proficiency level. We were especially concerned because many transfer students were failing the upper division writing test (WST) and being required to take additional classes at SJSU. At the same time, the Intersegmental Coordinating Council Curriculum and Assessment Cluster had recognized the variety among course offerings in the state's community colleges and begun to seek ways to articulate ESL standards across campuses.[4] Our project worked towards such articulation on a local level by addressing two issues—curriculum content and exit standards. In the limited space here, I will focus on this last project because it both builds on the previous two and represents the issue of the failure of articulation when it is defined as a question of developing standards that are accepted across segments rather than as a site for collaborative curriculum development.

Objectives

The objectives of this project were to:

1. ensure comparability and establish common exit standards for pre-1A ESL composition courses, standards that would prepare students for college writing;

2. ensure that students transferring from one college to another have comparable writing proficiency, that all students entering 1A on any campus would be equally and adequately prepared for that class;

3. identify students most at risk in composition classes. By identifying students whose previous literacy practices do not prepare them for academic writing, we can adjust course content and teaching methodology to provide classroom literacy communities for our students;

4. determine the relationship between course syllabi and what actually takes place in the writing class by comparing syllabi with portfolios;

5. compare students' writing proficiency with their class assignments by comparing essay scores with portfolios; and

6. begin cooperation and dialogue among the participating institutions and develop a cooperative model for use throughout the state.

Methods

A team of ESL instructors representing three of the community college districts in SJSU's service area (Mission, San José City, and Foothill) and faculty teaching in SJSU's Academic English Program (pre-1A for underprepared students) was assembled. Each campus collected data from two classes at each of the two levels of courses prior to 1A, a total of four classes from each campus. A sample of data from 1A classes was also collected for comparison. Five hundred and seventy-eight students participated, for most of whom standard academic English was an additional language.

We collected the following data:

1. *course syllabi*. We asked faculty to provide us with the syllabi that they handed out to students in class.

2. *entry/diagnostic/exit test instruments*. Each college provided copies of its test instruments, except those that are test secure (e.g., Michigan Test).

3. *student portfolios that included all student writing*. Since we wanted to discover exactly what happened in classrooms, we asked teachers to collect all writing—drafts, notes, final papers, and so on. We examined only a sample of the portfolios representing different abilities in writing as follows: two at each grade *A, B, C,* and *Fail.* The actual number submitted was 90 because not every class had two samples for each grade. The community colleges, for example, rarely had failing students because students who were failing mostly dropped out of class before the end of the semester. The project team examined the portfolios using an analytical scoring guide the team developed, a guide that reflected what we considered important attributes of university-level texts. We rated only the first and last out-of-class assignments using this analytical tool, as a contrast to the timed essay all students wrote.

4. *language use surveys.* This instrument had been used earlier at SJSU (Murray, Nichols, & Heisch, 1992) and gave us a profile of students at the different campuses, including demographic data, as well as students' uses of English and their L1 both at school and in the community.

5. *common essay exam, scored holistically by participating faculty using a six-point scale developed by the project team.*

We did not collect data on course grades since many variables contribute to this measure, ones that were not the focus of this project (e.g., attendance, number of assignments completed).

Findings

Student Profiles

The language use surveys showed that the students on the four campuses had very different profiles. The majority from the community colleges were high school graduates in their own countries, having arrived in the U.S. as young adults. In contrast, the majority from SJSU had been in the U.S. at least five years, having completed high school in the U.S. Community college students were older, on average, than SJSU students. Each community college in turn had its own profile. For example, more SJCC students spoke Vietnamese at age six than any other language, whereas at Foothill, the largest group spoke Spanish.

Curriculum

We examined curriculum from two perspectives—course syllabi and portfolios of student work. A comparison of portfolios and syllabi showed that syllabi are an inaccurate indicator of what goes on in actual classrooms. Many portfolios were far richer in writing genres, the writing process, and instructor feedback than the syllabus would lead one to expect. On the other hand, other portfolios indicated that some instructors barely met the minimum requirements (e.g., genres, length of assignments) detailed in the syllabus.

We also found that syllabi varied across the colleges and even within the same class level at the same institution. For example, in some courses students wrote only paragraphs, while in others at the same level they wrote fully developed essays. Tasks also varied considerably, some faculty focusing only on personal essays, others requiring students to write in a variety of genres. Some syllabi were based on the modes of writing (compare/contrast etc.); others on topic areas (e.g., censorship).

Student performance (as measured by their portfolio scores) was affected by the course design and the task. For example, many students who wrote only paragraphs wrote fully elaborated papers, but, because they were required to write only a paragraph, wrote several pages as one paragraph. Students writing paragraphs about a famous person often wrote with little knowledge of the person chosen, leading to short, undeveloped papers. In contrast, students in classes where instructors asked students to interview a class or community member and describe that person wrote richer, more detailed papers.

Student Progress

To measure student progress, we compared the scores on the first and last out-of-class assignments. Surprisingly, the numerical data indicated that students had made no progress. A closer examination showed that end-of-semester tasks were often more difficult than those assigned at the beginning of the semester. Typically, the first assignment was a personal essay, usually narrative genre. Since this task usually allowed students to draw on material they were both familiar with and interested in, they were able to write a well-developed paper. In contrast, the end-of-semester tasks were often argumentative essays on controversial topics with which students were less familiar, and students thus scored lower on these assignments.

Standards

We compared student proficiency using the timed essay. There was no correlation between course level and common essays scores. Students with high and low scores appeared at all levels, although students from two of the four colleges consistently outperformed the other two. The higher scores, we believe, are a result of the inclusion of native-speakers in both samples. Overall, the results indicate that entrance requirements for the various colleges are inconsistent. This is especially the case at community colleges where entrance tests have been advisory rather than mandatory. Similarly, exit standards varied across institutions. Those institutions that had a common final had developed common standards, at least for the language proficiency required for a timed essay. These institutions all agreed that this standard-setting exercise had a positive backwash effect on the curriculum, with faculty having a clearer and more common goal for their instruction.

Recommendations and Conclusions

We held a workshop for faculty from the four institutions to share our results. During the workshop, we asked faculty to read essays and analyze them using the portfolio assessment tool to determine whether faculty agreed with the team—they did. We also discussed our draft recommendations, with which faculty also agreed. The project team made the following recommendations, which they took back to their individual campuses for comment and possible implementation.

1. Institutions should develop clear goals and expectations for courses at each level.

2. At all levels, writing assignments should include academic genres in addition to personal/narrative assignments.

3. At all levels students should be encouraged to develop full-length essays, not just paragraphs.

4. Students should be exposed to many, varied, and complete models of academic English in order to write in that genre. Reading is an integral part of literacy. Excerpts do not provide such models.

5. Institutions should administer a common assessment (e.g., a final essay examination) to develop common standards for each institution and to foster communication among instructors. Such a direct writing sample should be a reading, followed be a writing prompt based on the reading.

6. Portfolio assessment should be considered carefully before being used systemwide. In our study, the content of portfolios was inconsistent because different institutions and different instructors within institutions assigned different genres (varying from a descriptive paragraph to a fully-developed argumentative essay). And, our single analytical scoring guide was not sufficiently robust to compare different genres. To ensure comparability across segments and instructors, we would need a standardized curriculum (yet, curricula must be responsive to student need), more finely tuned descriptions of genre, and a greater understanding of the range of difficulty among genre (the last two issues both involve further research). Until we can address these issues, portfolios as assessment tools are best used at the individual class or institutional level, where agreements can be reached collaboratively rather than being mandated. See Murray (1994) for a detailed discussion of the use of portfolios as assessment tools.

7. The participating institutions should develop a collective bank of exit essay prompts.

Conclusions

The five members of the project team learned much from this collaboration—about each other's programs and about articulation among colleges. For all of us, this was the first time we had looked in depth at each other's curricula, even though articulation agreements exist between the community colleges and SJSU. We were amazed at the similarities and differences across campuses. As we worked through the scoring guide for the timed essay and then the more complex guide for portfolio assessment, we learned what each valued in academic writing and were able to come to agreement. We engaged in debate and discussion about our pedagogical goals and our roles as educators. As we applied the instrument to student writing, we uncovered the different performances of students, differences often resulting from course syllabi and assignments. We also developed a richer understanding of the institutional complexities of our schools. While the SJSU classes one and two levels below freshman composition had 15 students, the equivalent at the community colleges had up to 38 students. As five colleagues working together, this newly acquired understanding was reward enough.

But, the project also had tangible benefits to our home institutions. One college gave reassigned time to a faculty member to develop coursewide holistically graded essay assessment. Another reworked the curriculum to incorporate reading and writing. Another made fully developed essays, rather than paragraphs, the major form of writing at all levels.

However, we also found (as we had done in the two previous projects) that comparability across segments is an impossible goal because of institutional demands. Articulating courses does not result in equal outcomes for students—or conditions for instructors. We began a conversation about our interdependent roles as educators within our local area, a conversation that was not to continue because funding for CCC/CSU Joint Projects has been discontinued. How can we continue this dialogue unfunded? Even the three grants we did receive gave no reassigned time—only funding for supplies, data analysis by a statistician, payment for faculty essay readers, and a graduate student from SJSU to coordinate the project. The numerous sessions to examine syllabi and to develop scoring guides and portfolio assessments we accomplished on our own time because we are reflective professionals who work to improve our own instruction and that at our institutions. Continuing the dialogue with no funding is not feasible, given faculty workloads.

I believe such dialogue is essential because the collaboration on these projects is articulation. Administrative agreements are not. Only the former can lead to educational change that ultimately affects our students' learning and lives. ∎

Endnotes:

1. The project team was Carol Abate (West Valley College), Allison Heisch (SJSU), Alice Gosak (San José City College), Kurt Gravenhorst (Foothill College), and Nick Roberts (Cabrillo College).

2. Many faculty participated in this project, too many to cite here.

3. The project team was Gretchen Biswell (SJSU), Alice Gosak (San José City College), Patricia Nichols (SJSU), Carol Wilson (Mission College), and Karen Yoshihara (Foothill College). In addition, many faculty and students from each institution participated.

4. Since then, the Intersegmental Council of Academic Senates (ICAS) has convened a committee that has developed a draft framework for the language education of ESL students across segments, called *California Pathways*.

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