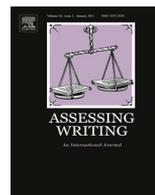




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Assessing Writing



Measures matter: Evidence of faculty development effects on faculty and student learning



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 May 2013

Received in revised form 27 November 2013

Accepted 4 December 2013

Available online 25 January 2014

Keywords:

Assessment

Rubrics

Learning outcomes

Writing across the curriculum

Quantitative reasoning

Critical thinking

ABSTRACT

In this paper, a team of researchers explores the benefits and challenges of using rubrics for analyzing faculty development influences on teaching strategies and student writing outcomes. Fine-grained rubrics, aligned with local faculty development practices and institutional conditions, proved more successful at identifying particular changes in practice than generic rubrics or holistic analyses of writing. Nonetheless, the complexity of tracing faculty development into student learning calls for a combination of context-dependent methods. The Tracer Project – a collaboration between a Midwestern Liberal Arts College (Carleton College or “CC”) and a large State University (Washington State University or “WSU”) – applies mixed methods to assess the effects on student learning of programs to teach faculty about writing across the curriculum, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking.

This paper is an invitation to other researchers to learn from the Tracer Project’s journey and to continue to develop approaches that will reveal faculty development effects on their campuses.

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1. Introduction

In the U.S., authorities ranging from a special federal commission (the [Spellings Commission, 2006](#)) to regional accrediting bodies endorse assessment as a means of documenting student learning over time, particularly through curricular and co-curricular experiences. Colleges and universities direct resources toward assessment, both to satisfy external reviewers (federal authorities, regional accreditors, grant review boards) and to address internal questions about quality, staffing, and overall sustainability of the higher education effort. As part of an effort to generate better learning and to provide evidence of that learning, colleges and universities invest in a range of educational programs known collectively as faculty development. Such programs may be explicitly designated as faculty development, e.g., orientation for new employees, interdisciplinary learning communities, specific workshops on institutional expectations or pedagogy, or summer support for curriculum development. Programs implicitly connected to faculty development might include occasional speakers, department-based pedagogical activities, and ad hoc teaching circles.

Such activities are assumed to promote at least two important goals. First, they provide venues for faculty to get acquainted, ask questions, and develop professional relationships within and outside of their disciplinary departments or programs. Second, these faculty development programs foster improved teaching, which implies improved student learning outcomes as faculty apply new or more effective techniques. A moment's reflection yields the insight that the assumptions of the first goal are supported as relationships develop, conversation and collaboration arise, and new employees become colleagues in a fuller sense. However, assumptions supporting the second goal require assessment of programs and their effects on student learning, an undertaking that is uncommon in higher education.

For two distinctly different institutions in the U.S., the question of faculty development effects on student learning has come into focus. Consequently, these two institutions, a small liberal arts college (Carleton College or "CC") and a large land grant university (Washington State University, or "WSU"), collaborated to address that question through mixed method research underwritten by the Spencer Foundation. Can a connection be traced between faculty training and student learning outcomes? Our answer after three years of mixed methods investigation is that the connection is elusive but detectable. The key variables are (1) the type of faculty development to be studied, (2) the methods used, and (3) the assessment instrument applied to relevant data. This paper will focus on CC's research experience, with some reference to WSU's experience. To address the complexity of tracing faculty learning through faculty development into student learning, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods was essential, e.g., participant-observation, structured interviews, textual analysis, and analysis of evaluation instruments. This paper is an evaluation of one quantitative method – among the many methods² – that the team utilized for understanding faculty development effects through analysis of student writing and faculty assignment prompts.

At both schools, a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) history is coupled with portfolio assessment of student work, which provides an archive of student work as well as faculty assignment prompts. Therefore, the textual analysis described below focuses on written products from faculty and students, material designed and produced in environments that value and practice sophisticated writing assessment.

While the Institution 1 team was unable to test the resulting data for statistical significance due to small sample size,³ we hope that by sharing the experience of developing and using this method, we will help others develop similar (and better) ways of assessing the effects of faculty development.

Literature connecting faculty training to student learning, while well developed in K-12 circles, is less common in the post-secondary context. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines document the role of interactive, small group pedagogies as well as undergraduate research in increasing student learning ([Ebert-May, Batlzi, & Weber, 2006](#); [Hoellwarth, Moelter, & Knight, 2005](#); [Laursen, Hunter, Seymour, Thiry, & Melton, 2010](#); [Middlecamp, 2008](#)). Faculty professional development programs demonstrate change of attitude and practice for program participants

² See [Rutz et al., 2012](#) for a discussion of the project's overall findings based upon the full array of research methodologies. See Appendices C and D for lists of CC's research methodologies.

³ CC's research sample was limited by such factors as funding, time, and access to student papers and faculty assignments.

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