Assessment Committee Paper #3, Part II; Spring 2018

Direct Assessment of Writing, Research, and Information Literacy Skills in First Year Seminar Courses

Rationale

In a continuing effort to move the Assessment Committee's work of writing/research assessment of the First Year Program (FYP) from Spring 2011 and Fall/Spring 2012 ([Report 2013](#)) into the hands of First Year faculty, plans were underway by fall 2015 to design and implement a course-embedded assessment for use in the First Year Seminar (FYS) courses. The program-wide project would first take place in spring 2017. Each First Year Seminar instructor would score their own students' papers, and following this, a second reader would read and score a random sample of papers from each seminar. Of particular concern were grading inconsistencies reported by both faculty and students, and a general de-emphasis on the teaching of writing and research skills in the First Year Program. Student complaints included both grading inconsistencies within team-taught FYP classes and inconsistencies in workloads across various FYP and FYS classes. St. Lawrence faculty also expressed concerns regarding the effectiveness of the FYP to prepare students for challenges they encounter in upper-division courses. In 2011(?) the full faculty voted in favor of a program-wide assessment to address these concerns.

Design/Background of Project

Course-embedded assessment practices are an established method of providing feedback to faculty and administrators (as well as current and potential students) regarding students' attainment of particular learning objectives ([ODU PP](#)). Used by departments and programs at St. Lawrence University, course-embedded assessment, when used consistently, is a potent tool for both assessment and curricular refinement. For the spring 2017 FYS writing/research assessment, using a single second reader to score papers across the various seminars was also a means of measuring consistency concerning instructors' expectations.

St. Lawrence University's faculty-approved FYP Philosophy and Goals Statement ([FYP Philosophy & Goals](#)) places a strong emphasis on the Program's support of communication skill building. Given these expectations, as well as the general importance of preparing first year students for college-level writing and research, there is a clear need to offer consistent quality teaching and mentoring of student writing and research skills throughout their first year at the University. Lower faculty expectations for major writing projects are likely to correlate with fewer instructional opportunities for students—such as instructor-led writing conferences and in-class writing workshops. This assessment project was designed to offer feedback on how well those goals were being met, and to identify specific areas in need of redress.

The assessment method was initially piloted with a group of FYS faculty in spring 2016. In April 2016, a norming session was offered to six FYS faculty who had agreed to participate in the pilot

study. Two sample papers were read and assigned scores based on the rubrics developed and used by the Assessment Committee members in 2011 & 2012 (five point scale; separate rubrics for writing & research). While initial scores for the first paper in the norming session were widely divergent, the ensuing discussion led to a stronger consensus for the second paper. Following the norming session, these six faculty scored their students' papers during, or immediately following, grading in May 2016 and submitted both scores and electronic copies of student papers over the summer. In August, the WORD Studio Director, who was coordinating the project, distributed the papers to a subgroup of Assessment Committee members and asked them to assign their own scores. In comparing the blind scoring of each group, it was determined that sufficient agreement had been reached to continue the project with the full FYS faculty.
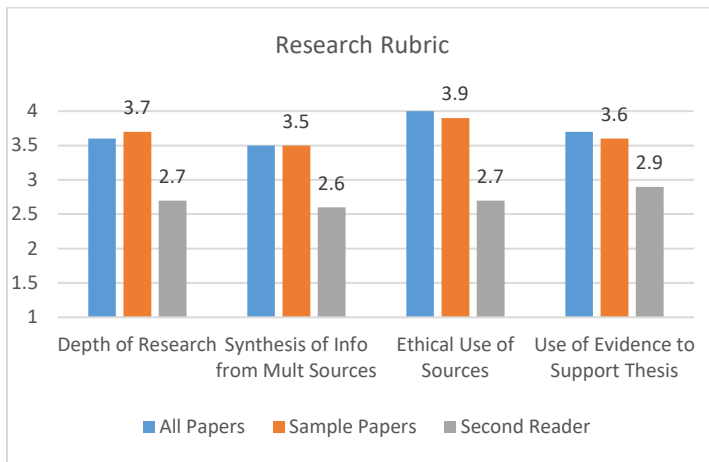
In December 2016, the project's coordinator met with the FYS faculty teaching in spring 2017, explained the project, and shared copies of the writing & research rubrics. A Sakai site was designed to provide information about the project, along with electronic copies of the rubrics and scoring sheets. The site also allowed faculty to submit their own students' papers and scores, but did not provide access to those of other faculty.

Faculty submitted data during the spring and summer of 2017, with an overall participation rate of 60%, including 24 faculty and a total of 319 papers. In spring 2018, a second reader performed a blind/objective reading of a random sample of three papers from each participating class (72 papers). Once the second reading had been completed, both sets of scores were tabulated and compared.

Results

Results tend to support concerns regarding inconsistencies in faculty ratings. The second reader's aggregate scores were consistently lower than faculty aggregate scores in all categories, and more than 20% lower in some categories ("Ethical Use of Sources," "Integrations of Source Material into Writing," Organization," "Paragraph Structure," and "Sentence Structure and Readability". While the second reader assigned primarily scores of 2 and 3 and barely any 5, faculty readers mostly assigned scores of 3, 4, and 5. Furthermore, while these differences may indicate a significant gap in expectations and/or interpretation of the rubric, there also tended to be a correlation across categories, with strong interrater reliability in most categories. (Graphs 1-2, Table 1)

Graph 1 – Research Rubric Mean Scores Faculty vs. Second Reader

Research Rubric

	Depth of Research	Synthesis of Info from Mult Sources	Ethical Use of Sources	Use of Evidence to Support Thesis
All Papers	3.7	3.5	3.9	3.6
Sample Papers	3.7	3.5	3.9	3.6
Second Reader	2.7	2.6	2.7	2.9

■ All Papers ■ Sample Papers ■ Second Reader

Graph 2 – Writing Rubric Mean Scores Faculty vs. Second Reader

Writing Rubric

	Intergrations of Source Material into Writing	Thesis/ Controlling Idea	Organization	Paragraph Structure	Sentence Structure and Readability	Mechanics
All Papers	3.7	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.5	3.4
Second Reader	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.7	2.4	2.5

■ All Papers ■ Sample Papers ■ Second Reader
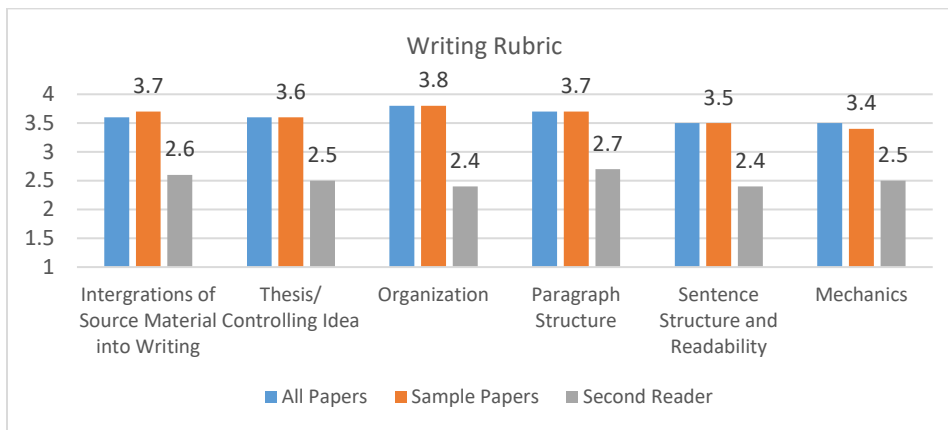
Table 1 – Reliability and Mean Scores Spring 2017

	Interrater Reliability S2017	S2017 Faculty	S2017 2nd Rater
Research/Use of Sources			
Depth of Research	.622	3.67	2.70
Synthesis of Info from Mult Sources	.613	3.50	2.58
Ethical Use of Sources	.812	3.94	2.63
Use of Evidence to Support Thesis	.817	3.61	2.92
Writing			
Intergrations of Source Material into Writing	.411	3.65	2.58
Thesis/ Controlling Idea	.814	3.57	2.46
Organization	.733	3.75	2.42
Paragraph Structure	.244	3.67	2.57
Sentence Structure and Readability	.586	3.54	2.38
Mechanics	.608	3.44	2.47
Average		**3.63**	**2.57**

The results revealed wide variation among FYS faculty scores, with faculty who had attended norming sessions (participated in the pilot), faculty development and/or informational workshops on teaching writing during their early years teaching in the First Year Program tending to assign lower scores than faculty who had not participated in any of the above. In many cases, scores of these veteran (?) faculty were close to the 2nd reader's scores.

Finally, it was noted that the second reader's scores were consistent with the scores assigned by Assessment Committee members in 2010, indicating the students' writing and research skills, at least overall, remained level with the results from the 2009 Assessment despite variations in faculty expectations. (Graph 3)

Graph 3 – Comparison of Mean Scores for the FYS Writing Assessment in Spring 2017 and Spring 2010

Mean Assessment Scores S2017 Faculty & 2nd Rater and S2010 Assessment
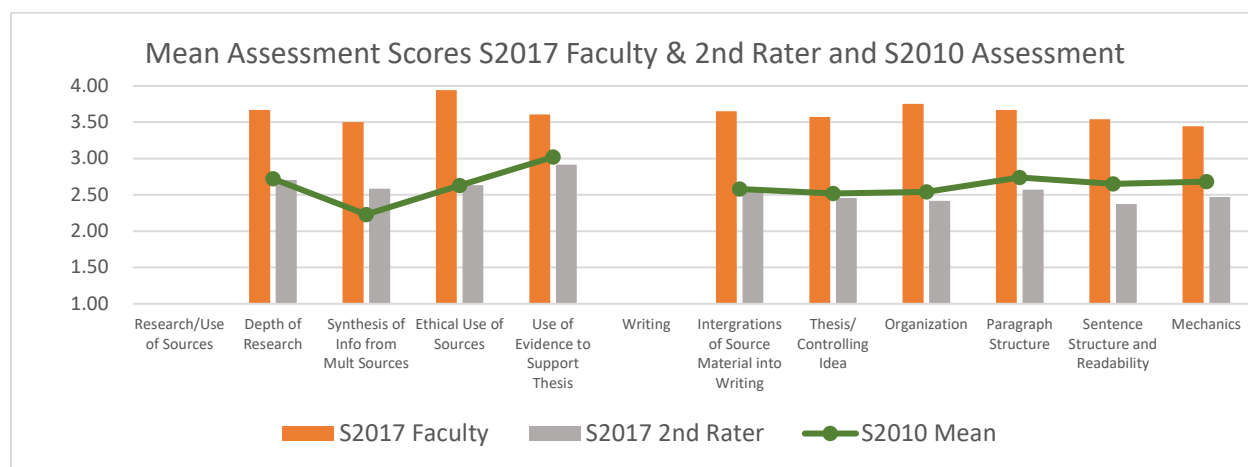
* The rubric for research/use of sources was changed after 2010, thus no comparison possible

Discussion & Conclusions

Potential explanations for the gaps between scores for first and second readers include a variety of factors. They may reflect a different approach to the scoring. Specifically, the second reader (and the assessment committee in 2010) approached scoring with the idea that the rubrics could be used to score student papers across all four years (both lower and upper division writing assessment), while several FYS faculty may have seen the rubric as a first-year writing and research rubric only. FYP faculty might have also been assigning scores based on their expectations of a first year student's potential to succeed in their course and used the rubric more as a grading than an assessment rubric. Norming sessions prior to future course-embedded assessment efforts are strongly recommended.

While efforts were made in 2012 and 2013 to share results of the previous assessment with faculty in the program, several new faculty had joined the program in 2014, 2015, and 2016, who had not been looped in on these results. Furthermore, fewer faculty development opportunities were offered to FYS faculty in 2015 & 2016, as more emphasis was placed on the residential aspect of the First Year Program. For example, the writing workshops offered to

new FYP faculty during the Canaras retreats in previous years were dropped from the Canaras Agenda in 2015 and 2016. The WORD Studio offered a grade norming workshop to FYP faculty in fall 2016, but it was not advertised as mandatory and was sparsely attended by faculty.

Results of this round of writing/research assessment indicate a need for future faculty development, grade norming sessions; minor modifications are also suggested for both rubrics to seek further clarity. In the interest of further improving upon the writing/research aspect of our current First Year Program's spring seminar and reinvigorating the First Year Program's emphasis on introducing students to college-level writing and research, sharing these results with program faculty is also highly recommended. Grading and workload inconsistencies have long been a point of criticism from current and past students in the program. Students are quick to identify it as an issue, but it is also fixable when program faculty work together towards meeting common program goals. Approaching this task with a cooperative spirit also could lead to greater faculty engagement and a heightened sense of faculty ownership of the First Year Program.

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