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English Discipline Assessment Report 2016/2017

English Discipline

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English Discipline Assessment Report, 2016-7

Purpose

In 2016-7, English assessed our practices for teaching how to write a coherent argument, both with and without secondary sources. This decision was in response to a general sense that student argumentation was not as strong as we hoped in 3000-level and 4000-level courses. As a result, we planned to examine the kinds of assignments we were giving students at the 2000-level and 3000-level, and to assess whether we shared an emphasis upon argumentation. In addition, we had concerns about when secondary sources would be employed as part of student arguments. These assessments provide a deeper understanding of student learning towards several core UMM learning goals, including inquiry and analysis; critical thinking; and written communication.

To do so, we examined approximately 20 writing assignments from 2000-level and 3000-level courses from a variety of faculty in English, and conducted a discussion of the assignments, our teaching practices to introduce them, and the writing processes we facilitate.

Observations about 2000-level assignments

Our discussion showed clearly that we regularly ask students to write arguments. We found, generally, an effort to introduce students to primary and secondary source relationships and to opposing positions within scholarship.

In English 2501, Introduction to Literary Studies, and in the Survey courses (2201, 2202, 2211, and 2212) close analysis is emphasized. Often argumentation involves synthesis of primary sources (such as 'compare/contrast' assignments), but little synthesis of secondary sources. Regarding primary sources, a strong focus is upon grounding primary texts in historical context.

Most faculty expose students to secondary sources, but few have them doing research on their own. We ask students to respond to material in various ways in relation to ongoing scholarly conversations. Often this involves exposing students to established scholarly perspectives, and asking students to respond to them in various ways. For example, instructors might ask students to look at a critical secondary source, and find evidence in the primary text that supports or contests the position in the secondary source. These kinds of activities occur in some surveys and frequently in 2501. In 2501, most use critical editions, although some have students doing library research.

Generally, there was agreement that we'd like students to learn to handle evidence of all kinds more precisely, purposefully, and accurately in building arguments.

Observations about 3000-level assignments

In 3000-level courses, close analysis continues to be emphasized. In addition, there were a number of common types of assignments that involved secondary source research. For example, many faculty employ annotated bibliography assignments, as well as other assignments that demonstrate that students understand the scholarly argument(s) to which they are responding. There was a strong sense from some faculty that students need careful instruction in how to read secondary sources effectively.

Additionally, students are often asked to do more with research. They are regularly asked to find sources (as in the annotated bibliography assignment), to synthesize secondary sources (which helps students learn to see how sources operate in relation to one another, and respond to sources in complex ways.

Relation between 2000-level and 3000-level courses

Generally, faculty affirmed that we are teaching appropriate argumentative skills at the 2000 and 3000 levels. There were several areas that we'd like to see improve. First, students' ability to use evidence effectively was viewed as needing improvement. In addition, we'd like to foster better understanding of synthesis, secondary material, and architecture of longer arguments.

Revision Requirements:

Because revision is an essential part of building coherent arguments, we discussed differences in revision requirements and other forms of process-related instruction. We found that in 2501, most faculty employ 'scaffolding' activities to help students build arguments effectively. Some offer options for revision, but do not require them. In some classes, there is workshopping of part-drafts.

Other courses, such as Understanding Writing, require students to do regular revision. In some courses, revision took on different forms. For example, in one course students take an earlier response paper and transform it into a final essay, which involves some revision. Others, however, do not require any revision but do offer feedback support during the writing process. These faculty often assigned frequent, brief argumentative essays in order to give students regular feedback and encourage revision. One key recommendation emerging from this discussion was that faculty consider designing more 'scaffolding' of paper writing (which offers similar benefits to formal revision).

Teaching Practices:

We discussed successful teaching strategies for helping students learn to make arguments. These included : 1) Modelling working through a secondary source essay—looking at how it is built; 2) using 'critical flow charts' to encourage students to learn how to read secondary sources; 3) commenting on global writing issues rather than giving students comments on specific features to 'fix;' 4) asking students to verbally articulate their arguments to others in class; and 5) teaching 'what goes in a paragraph' via the 'MEAL' model (Main point, evidence, analysis, and link). We discussed reviewing and/or re-thinking our annotation and grading strategies for writing assignments that will not be revised to help direct students towards revision on future assignments.

Conclusions and Needs:

Through our assessment, we affirmed that there is frequent emphasis upon argumentation in 2000- and 3000-level English courses, and we found some general consensus (with ample room for and acceptance of differences) regarding the inclusion of secondary source materials in argumentative assignments. Generally it was agreed that students need more help in learning to handle evidence effectively, more opportunities for understanding the conventions and values around peer-reviewed scholarship and how to read and employ it, and more opportunities for learning argument building and revising processes. We also raised questions about whether our major curricular structure needed rethinking in order to foreground some of this learning, although we did not generally agree that this was urgent. As a result of the review, faculty are resolved to experiment with further assignments in 2000- and 3000-level courses that will address these three apparent areas of student need.