

Report on Summer 2017 Assessment Projects

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Background

Among the results of the summer 2016 assessment project, which involved reading a representative sample of senior papers from across the college and scoring them on three General Education Learning Outcomes (written communication, critical and creative thinking, and research fluency), was the finding that faculty in different disciplines did not have a shared understanding of how critical and creative thinking might be demonstrated in a paper, nor did they agree on the various components of the research fluency rubric when applied to senior-level papers from disciplines other than their own. Further, in faculty discussions of that 2016 report--hosted jointly by the Committee on General Education (COGE) and the assessment coordinator during the 2016-17 academic year--it became clear that although we knew where in the curriculum the various learning outcomes were introduced, we did not know exactly where they were reinforced and developed in students' careers at RIC. Given that the General Education curriculum was specifically designed to be vertical—the learning outcomes are *college* learning outcomes, meant to be achieved by the end of each student's baccalaureate program—this uncertainty was problematic. A chief motive for revising the General Education program in 2012 was NEASC's requirement that the program be assessed; the new program responded to that requirement by identifying clear student learning outcomes, thereby making the program assessable. Given that the purpose of assessment is to improve programs in order to increase student achievement, the lack of agreement about how to measure these outcomes has stalled progress: we cannot improve the program without first understanding how well it is working and we can't understand how well it is working if we cannot agree on evidence of student achievement of learning outcomes.

The 2016-17 academic year was the fifth year of what many still call the “new” General Education Program, and therefore issues of assessment and improvement are becoming increasingly urgent. Further, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that we are now at the point at which students—and many faculty members—do not have a real understanding of the purposes of the program and see it as an assortment of boxes that each student needs to check off in order to graduate. College-wide discussions of learning outcomes could help to remedy that problem, but those discussions are unlikely to be productive without better definitions and guidelines than we now have. The summer 2017 assessment project was created in cooperation with COGE to begin to address some of these issues.

The summer project built on work done by the chair of COGE during the 2016-17 academic year to gather information from departments about where various learning outcomes were addressed in their major (e.g., oral communication) and how their discipline would define critical and creative thinking. COGE put aside clarifying the research fluency rubric in order to defer to a committee already

working on a revision of that rubric to bring it in line with new guidelines on information fluency from the American Library Association. COGE did, however, look closely at the courses departments and programs had identified as their writing in the discipline (WID) courses and found that some programs still had no such courses approved by COGE and also that the WID webpage linked from the General Education webpage had many disabled or dead links. In addition, we had only a vague statement about WID courses to guide departments when they were asked to identify the department's WID courses. The chair of COGE and the assessment coordinator agreed to begin the work needed by holding two all-day discussion sessions with faculty members from across the college to develop recommendations and guidelines to address both WID and critical and creative thinking concerns. Participants in each session were provided with articles and other materials and asked to do some reading and thinking in advance of their session. The rest of this report focuses on suggestions that emerged from those two sessions.

Writing in the Discipline (WID)

Participants: Mikaila Arthur (Sociology), Jeremy Benson (FSEHD, Ed Studies), Praveena Gullapalli (Anthropology), Jeanne Haser Lafond (SoM, Accounting/CIS), Quenby Hughes (History), Rebeka Merson (Biology), Janice Okoomian (Gender & Women's Studies), Megan Smith (Psychology), Jeremy Thayer (SSW) Michael Michaud, chair of the Writing Board, attended a portion of the meeting and provided information to help guide the discussion.

The specific goals of this session were to describe clearly for COGE what all WID courses should include in order to: improve the mapping of GenEd learning goals, offer departments better guidelines as they develop/improve their WID requirements, make decisions about assessment of this GenEd requirement, and recommend resources.

Recommendations about what all WID courses should include:

Ideally, each department/program should identify at least two courses in which writing for the discipline is taught consciously. One should be at the sophomore level and one at the senior level. The lower-level course should include transparently-taught introductions to several forms of writing common to the field; the upper-level course should develop students' work in some of the forms of writing taught in the lower-level course. Every WID course should *teach* writing, not just assign and evaluate it, with students offered opportunities for drafting and revision and writing instruction incorporated into the class content.

Recommendations about COGE's next steps:

- Develop a statement for faculty members about implementing WID in general, aimed at allaying fears and clarifying requirements (for example, that statement should include the comments that not everything students write in a WID course must be graded, drafting could be peer-review based, writing assignments already in use can be modified to fit WID requirements)

by phasing an assignment, and so on, as well as a clear explanation of “writing to learn”).

- Develop a college-wide WID statement to be included on every program/department’s WID course’s syllabus and also on the General Education webpage.
- Ask that each program/department develop a program/department-specific WID statement to be included on the syllabi for their WID courses and also posted on the General Education webpage for WID courses. Emphasize that developing and explaining WID elements should be a *department’s* responsibility, not the work of a chair. To encourage department-wide conversations, perhaps COGE could offer lunch tickets for mini-retreats. Those conversations should center on several questions: why is writing important in our discipline? What does writing in our discipline look like (the rhetorical situation)? Where and how do we teach or should we teach writing in our discipline? COGE should develop a template for such statements.
- Develop a webpage designed for students that includes the answers to a series of common WID questions written by each department’s faculty, and that identifies the classes that qualify for WID status and why. (note: many other colleges and universities have such a page, and so there are good models from which we could work)
- Develop a compliance mechanism for courses designated as meeting the WID requirement (such as collecting and reviewing syllabi on a regular schedule).
- Sponsor an annual workshop for faculty teaching WID (in cooperation with the FCTL and the Writing Board).
- Recommend that each faculty member teaching WID attend at least one more extensive writing pedagogy workshop (again, FCTL and the Writing Board are resources for this possibility).
- Work with the Writing Center Director to investigate the possibility of having trained undergraduate peer writing mentors from different disciplines available for WID courses

Recommendations about coordination and assessment:

At least for the initial work, which is considerable, the college should appoint a faculty member to serve as WID coordinator (parallel to the FYS coordinator). That person would develop the WID website (see below for specific items to be included), gather materials from departments and work with those that ask for assistance in developing their WID statements, and facilitate continuing improvement for WID, including working with departments on assessment options. Assessment properly belongs with each program/department because the WID courses are part of their curricula. COGE and the assessment coordinator should encourage departments to include assessment of WID courses and to report results to COGE to help with ongoing assessment and improvement of the General Education program. Finally, we would like to see WID included and clearly identified on the Rhode Maps for each major.

Recommendations about specific elements of a student-facing WID website:

- General statement about writing at RIC and definition of WID
- Answers to questions for each department to address, and to include:
 - What is writing in the discipline of X?
 - Why is writing crucial to the discipline of X?
 - Why will learning about writing in the field help prepare students for the future?
 - What are some of the common writing tasks that someone in the discipline might encounter?
 - What are the courses that qualify for WID in the department?
- Writing Guides in each discipline (brief; Harvard's 4-page model is useful), including common types of writing assigned in that discipline and a style sheet or link to a site with such a style sheet (e.g., MLA for English).
- Section on WID resources for students, including information about discipline-specific writing tutors and links to useful websites.

Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT)

Participants: Jeremy Benson (FSEHD, Ed Studies), Suzanne Conklin (Biology), Jeanne Haser Lafond (SoM, Accounting/CIS), Elisa Miller (History), Tamara Nopper (Sociology), Janice Okoomian (Gender & Women's Studies), Sylvia Ross (Nursing), Megan Smith (Psychology), Jeremy Thayer (SSW)

The specific goals of this session were to describe clearly for COGE definitions of critical and creative thinking that will be more useful than the ones we currently have; to devise a draft rubric for CCT learning outcomes to replace the current one; and to make recommendations about assessment of this GenEd outcome.

Recommendations about General Education overall:

A wide-ranging discussion about RIC students' understanding (or lack thereof) of the GenEd program and why they are required to take courses outside their majors resulted in a broad recommendation that COGE launch an ongoing information and marketing effort to explain the program and the meaning of a baccalaureate degree to both faculty and students. We might use the new "Cogitations" newsletter as a vehicle to reach faculty members. Further, the very term itself—"general education"—is neither interesting nor descriptive; perhaps using a term such as "breadth" (as the U of California system does) might be helpful.

Recommendations about critical and creative thinking outcome(s):

The group agreed that problems in assessing critical and creative thinking are rooted in the two learning outcomes being treated as one instead of separated. Although creative thinking requires critical thinking, they are not the same; yoking them together into one learning outcome does not make sense. As one participant put it, "Critical thinking is about being able to identify and explain the box that creative thinking demands that we think outside." Every program or department

includes critical thinking; not every program or department should be expected to include creative thinking. In some fields, the emphasis in the undergraduate years is properly on teaching the fundamental concepts and skills of the discipline, with creative approaches discouraged until those fundamental are mastered. We recommend that the two be revised into two distinct outcomes, each with its own definition and rubric.

The current critical and creative thinking outcome actually describes *only* critical thinking:

“Critical and Creative Thinking Students will be able to analyze and interpret information from multiple perspectives, question assumptions and conclusions, and understand the impact of biases, including their own, on thinking and learning.”

We recommend that the existing phrasing be dropped and that the following be substituted:

“Creative Thinking Students will be able to combine existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways appropriate to the task at hand and work in an imaginative way characterized by a high degree of innovation and risk taking.”

“Critical Thinking Students will be able to actively and skillfully conceptualize, question, apply, analyze, synthesize, and/or evaluate information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication.”

Recommendations about rubrics and assessment:

One of the chief difficulties raters experienced in scoring papers during the 2016 project was the limited number of options (0-4) on the rating scale. Research in the social sciences suggests that (1) people resist assigning a zero to an item they are scoring and (2) a seven-point scale is standard and offer a far more useful set of scores for analysis than does a four-point scale. However, there is no need to elaborate on every level of the 7-point scale; instead, one can treat 2, 4, and 6 as “mid-points,” equivalent to a half point, when a paper being scored falls between two stages of the rubric.

The current rubric looks like this:

- 3 highly-developed stage**
- 2 developed stage**
- 1 emerging stage**
- 0 non-existent**

We recommend that COGE shift to a 7-point rating system for all of its rubrics, titled as follows:

- 7 highly-developed stage**
- 6**
- 5 developed stage**
- 4**

3 emerging stage

2

1 non-existent

Such a shift is likely to make rating artifacts easier and also to result in more detailed, reliable, and therefore useful assessment data.

See appendix 1 of this report for recommended new rubrics for assessing creative thinking and critical thinking. These rubrics are revised versions of the CCT rubrics drafted in 2013 and the one currently in use.

Appendix 1

Rubrics for Assessing General Education

Critical Thinking Rubric:

Critical thinking is an open minded and intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, questioning, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication.

Student...	7 Highly-Developed Stage	5 Developed Stage	3 Emerging Stage	1 Non-Existent
Demonstrates Understanding of the Problem, Question or Issue	The question, problem or issue to be considered critically is significant and complex and is stated clearly and described thoroughly, delivering all relevant information necessary for full understanding.	The question, problem or issue to be considered critically has limited significance or complexity. It is stated, described, and clarified so that understanding is not seriously impeded by omissions	The question, problem or issue to be considered critically is relatively basic, uninteresting or insignificant. It is stated but description leaves some terms undefined, ambiguities unexplored, boundaries undetermined, and/or backgrounds unknown.	The question, problem or issue to be considered critically is stated without clarification or description.
Considers Underlying Assumptions	Assumptions of self or others are considered thoroughly.	Assumptions of self or others are considered partially.	Assumptions of self or others are identified, but are not integrated into the discussion.	Assumptions of self or others are not considered.
Selects and Then Analyzes Evidence for Reasoning	Evidence selected is relevant, well-chosen, and analyzed carefully.	Evidence selected is relevant and subjected to some basic analysis.	Evidence is selected but only occasionally, or is either not relevant or not analyzed.	No evidence is selected or analyzed.
Draws and Communicates Own Conclusions, Perspective, Hypothesis, or Position	Position presented is clear and sophisticated, addressing the complexity of the issue, with logical, relevant, and thorough reasons.	Position is clear and adequate but lacks complexity. Reasons provided are logical and relevant, but not thorough.	Position is simplistic, unclear, obvious or just repeats another's position. Reasons are provided but only occasionally, or are not logical or sufficiently relevant.	Perspective, hypothesis or position is missing. No reasons are provided.

Creative Thinking Rubric:

Creative Thinking reflects the capacity to combine existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways appropriate to the task at hand and the experience of thinking, reacting, and working in an imaginative way characterized by a high degree of innovation and risk taking.

Student...	7 Highly-Developed Stage	5 Developed Stage	3 Emerging Stage	1 Non-Existent
Presents Evidence of Flexible Thought	Effectively and flexibly uses a broad range of strategies appropriate to the task at hand, including some which are unexpected or novel.	Uses more than one strategy appropriate to the task at hand, and uses them in a flexible and effective manner.	Uses more than one strategy to address the task, but poorly, or uses a single strategy flexibly, or uses a strategy not appropriate to the task.	Uses only one strategy to address the task, which may not be an appropriate strategy for the task, and uses it rigidly.
Produces Something Original	Transforms or goes beyond existing ideas or solutions by creating something new to the student.	Creates an idea, question, format or product with significant elements that are novel or unique to the student.	Makes a new to the student application of existing ideas, questions, formats or products.	Merely reports or repeats existing ideas, questions, formats or products.
Demonstrates Intellectual Courage	Significantly challenges conventional wisdom or established ideas with an innovative approach or idea that is appropriate to the task.	Goes beyond the confines of conventional wisdom or established ideas without challenging them, but with adding an innovative approach or idea appropriate to the task.	Goes beyond the confines of conventional wisdom or established authority, but with an approach or idea that is not appropriate to the task.	Takes no risk.