

## PROJECT PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Summer 2008

### INTRODUCTION

During the week of May 19<sup>th</sup> through May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Office of Assessment Services secured the services of four Arkansas State University faculty members to serve as raters in the Higher Learning Commission Assessment Academy Project on Writing and Critical Thinking Assessment. Project raters included Patricia Robertson from the College of Business, Michael Cundall from the Honors College, Dixie Keyes from the College of Education, and Shannon Beasley from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

On Monday, May 19<sup>th</sup>, the raters received training on application of the developed rubrics. During the rest of the week, the raters worked in teams of two applying the rubrics to 100 artifacts. After reviewing 10 to 20 artifacts and rating them singly, the raters would then come together with their partners and an Assessment Services staff member and “calibrate” their scores. The raters always had to be within one point with their partners before the score could be considered final. Therefore, if raters were more than one point apart, they were required to discuss the artifact until a consensus was reached on a final score.

On Friday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, all the raters assembled again with Assessment Services staff for a debriefing session. After applying the rubrics to 100 artifacts, the raters had significant recommendations. What follows are their comments and suggestions.

### WRITING RUBRIC

#### *“Voice” Domain*

- Raters felt that the “Voice” domain may be a problem for some writing. For example, it may be very difficult to apply that portion of the rubric to technical or business writing. Further, whether or not a writer is “sincere” is simply not applicable in some disciplines. (MC and PR)

#### *“Sentence Fluency” Domain*

- Raters agreed unanimously that “Sentence Fluency” was the **most difficult** criterion in the Writing Rubric to apply.
- Raters suggested that “Sentence Fluency” as a concept may not even be applicable in some disciplines. Business’ assessment consultant suggested it was not applicable to some business writings and that the project rubric as a whole was too ambitious. (PR)
- “Writing has an easy flow and rhythm...”, “Writing has cadence...”, and “Text hums along with a steady beat but is more mechanical than fluid...” all caused difficulty in rating process. Raters felt these phrases are too subjective. The word “cadence” is acceptable, but the phrase “text hums...” and the word “fluid” caused confusion. What is “fluid”? What is “easy flow”? The descriptors are hard to understand and apply. They overlap too much. (PR and SB) Example was given that if we had blindly evaluated a James Joyce work with the project rubric, then he may have received poor scores. (SB)
- Raters questioned how run-on sentences affect sentence fluency? Is that a sentence fluency issue or is it a conventions issue?
- Raters found concept of “connectives” troublesome. Does that refer to conjunctions and transitions?
- Raters questioned how repetition of words should be addressed. (MC) Should the phrase “repetition of words” be added to rubric? (SB)
- Raters suggested that the word “attempts” be added at some level. (MC)
- Discussion indicated that raters may need some training on sentence fluency for different disciplines. Sentence Fluency in Business may differ from Sentence Fluency in Social Science. (DK)

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### WRITING RUBRIC - Continued

#### *“Conventions” Domain*

- Discussion indicated that if the domain was renamed to “Grammar and Conventions” or “Conventions of Grammar” it might eliminate some confusion. If the domain were renamed, raters questioned if the word grammar should be removed from descriptors. (DK)
- Raters questioned if this domain includes issues such as pronoun usage, word tense problems, and noun-verb agreement? Should those phrases be used in descriptors? (DK)
- Discussion indicated that raters may need some training on conventions for different disciplines. Conventions in Business may differ from conventions in Social Science.
- Raters had questions about paragraphing and indentation? Are these issues scored under “Conventions” or “Organization”? (PR and MC)

### CRITICAL THINKING RUBRIC

#### *“Considers Context and Assumptions” Domain*

- Raters agreed unanimously that “Considers Context & Assumptions” was the **most difficult** criterion in the Critical Thinking Rubric to apply.
- Raters often struggled with the fact that assignments did not require this criterion. The result was confusion on how to score. (PR) Raters wondered if the rubric should include a Not Applicable score, or should raters score low for absence of criterion? (MC) Raters also suggested that exceptional critical thinking simply implies that the students will go beyond the prompt and address issues anyway. (DK) In any case, in training this issue must be addressed and resolved.
- Raters noticed that in assessing the audience, students often seemed to assume that audience was the professor and, therefore, did not even address the assessment of audience. (PR)
- Raters considered the length of the assignments to be an issue in evaluating critical thinking. Short papers simply did not allow for development of all domains on rubric. (MC)
- Raters discussed whether “Considers Context & Assumptions” should be combined with “Communicates Own Perspective...” (MC)
- Other discussion suggested that “Considers Context & Assumptions” should be split into separate domains (“Considers Context” and “Considers Assumptions”)? (BD)
- Raters questioned whether considering “ethical dimensions” should be a descriptor under “Considers Context...” since self assessment has an ethical component. (DK)
- Discussion indicated that the notion of assumptions is crucial in critical thinking and cannot be removed from rubric. (BD)
- Raters stressed that the phrase “explores relevant contexts” is very subjective since what is relevant to one person may be completely irrelevant to another. (SB)

#### *“Communicates Own Perspective, Hypothesis, or Position” Domain*

- Raters agreed that the phrase “Position is clearly adopted with little consideration...” under Emerging/Not Yet should be changed to “Position is adopted with little consideration, failing to clarify the position relative to one’s own.”

#### *“Assesses Conclusions, Implications, & Consequences” Domain*

- Discussion addressed whether ethical considerations should be included in descriptors under this domain. (MC)

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### RATER TRAINING

- Overall, raters were happy with training. They especially appreciated the opportunity to practice using rubrics as a group.
- Raters agreed that training needed to include **more examples** that demonstrated particularly difficult aspects of the rubrics. Examples include:
  - Examples of assumptions in essays. Example of an essay questioning assumptions appropriately and an example of egocentric writing.
  - Examples of poor and strong sentence fluency. Examples of choppy sentences and well structured, smooth sentences.
  - Examples of students who took risk in Voice versus writing that was “risk-free.”
  - Examples of assignments that do not ask for certain criterion with instruction on how to assess those domains. Do raters give a Not Applicable score or a low score? (DK)

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

- Raters agreed that pairs of raters were sufficient. A third rater was not necessary. However, having two pairs of raters evaluate the same artifacts may have been useful for reliability purposes.

Assessment Services believes third person would be useful so that pairs would not be as apt to meet in the middle instead of arguing viewpoints.
- Raters agreed that working with a fellow rater from a very different discipline was very helpful and, perhaps, crucial to effectively rating essays.
- Raters agreed that prompts were valuable in rating artifacts. (MC) In fact, they questioned how you could begin to rate without them. (PR) They stressed that for the critical thinking artifacts the prompt was absolutely necessary, but for the writing, rating *might* could be accomplished without the prompt. (SB)
- Discussion among raters was mixed concerning whether or not students should be allowed to see rubrics before completing assignments. Is that practice akin to “teaching to the test”? Some thought it was. (MC) Others disagreed. (NN and BD)
- The raters agreed that overall the descriptors in the rubrics are too wordy. It creates confusion in application. Rubrics often are not clear.
- Raters suggested that the levels on the rating scale need to be mutually exclusive and the domains need to be mutually exclusive (as much as possible.)
- Raters felt that overall the university must provide consistent training for students in critical thinking from FYE courses through senior level courses.
- Raters suggested that ASU should identify a critical thinking expert in every department. (DK)
- Discussion addressed whether written assignments adequately display critical thinking skills of the entire student population. Perhaps projects, presentations, lab experiences, internships, etc. would be more appropriate. However, assessment of those activities could be difficult. (NN)
- Raters discussed whether the university as a whole assigns too many short papers in courses rather than one or two long papers since longer papers allow more opportunity to display critical thinking skills.

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### GENERAL DISCUSSION - Continued

- Raters discussed whether the university as a whole assigns too many opinion papers that do not build research skills and the ability to cite references correctly?
- Discussion in the group addressed whether the 6 point rubric is too broad? Business' assessment consultant told the COB that it was too big. However, advantages to 6 point rubric include the ability to show progress. (PR and BD)
- Raters wondered if, as Business' assessment consultant suggested, the project Writing Rubric was too ambitious.
- Raters agreed that "Not Yet" on the project rubrics is too soft and should be changed to something like "Unacceptable." (MC) Raters also recommended that "Wow" be changed to "Exceptional." (SB)
- Discussion addressed whether all descriptors in a given domain must be satisfied for the artifact to qualify for the score. (NN)
- Raters asserted that sending the rubrics to the raters in advance of training was valuable and essential.
- Raters suggested that professors tailor assignments to fit rubrics.

### RATERS' PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

- Raters agreed that they would rethink how they would approach teaching in the upcoming fall term. (PR, MC, and SB)
- Raters stressed that they got some great tips from their partner raters. (PR)
- Raters had a much greater appreciation for the benefits of collaborating with people from other fields. (PR)
- Raters valued being able to see student work through another's eyes. (SB)
- Raters found the simple reading of the papers to be of great value. (SB and PR)
- Raters felt that the experience would help with current projects more than expected. (DK)

### **Quotes**

*"I am delighted that I participated in this project for numerous reasons. First, this project will enhance my teaching next semester. I plan to give more writing and critical thinking assignments in my classes, and I will use rubrics more often. Second, this project gave me excellent ideas for the College of Business assessment process for AACSB purposes. Third, my partner and I engaged in constructive discussions about different types of writing and critical thinking. My partner gave me many valuable ideas, including tips about grading written assignments. Fourth, I enjoyed reviewing assignments from other areas of the University. Those assignments gave me ideas for new assignments in my own classes.*

*"I gained much more from my participation in this project than I expected. This project made me realize that collaboration across campus should increase because working with persons from other Colleges was a terrific learning experience for me."*

Patricia Robertson from the College of Business

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### RATERS' PERSONAL REFLECTIONS - Continued

*"I found the project to be very interesting especially as we became more fluent with the rubrics and began to really understand that in certain cases that while the artifact may be overall good, there might be areas where it simply does not meet the rubrics. This made me rethink some of my education goals as I teach."*

Michael Cundall from the Honors College

*"I not only enjoyed it, but I learned from EVERYONE involved in the project. My involvement has turned me toward thinking about the application of critical thinking and how I can help Assessment Services further this important task."*

Dixie Keyes from the College of Education

*"Wonderful experience for me. (My partner was outstanding.) Both of the rubrics will absolutely play a significant role in my coming classes. Both caused me to consider areas of student engagement with scholarship I hadn't really considered. It would be helpful to students, I think, to have instructors spend some time in class going over rubrics such as these, so the students will be absolutely clear about what is expected of them and what goes into evaluating their work, which will ultimately determine their grade."*

Shannon Beasley from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences