



Gaining Grounds Revisited: Sustaining Tales of Development

Lynne A Rhodes
University of South Carolina Aiken

Sustainable development is a popular phrase often associated with environmental studies, but the phrase can serve as ecological metaphor through which to view environments associated with writing assessment and writing program development. Sustainable environments depend on symbiotic relationships. Writing assessment and writing program development constantly rely on the classroom environment as the essential site for understanding student growth in writing. Applying a metaphor of sustainable development to student development in writing presumes that novice writers will first acclimate to academic writing across the curriculum, and that more experienced students will acculturate to writing within their chosen disciplines. But each student and each classroom teacher, in turn, affects the environment of generalized assimilation and acculturation since each student, at any given time, has unique and different needs. Thus, institutional diagnostics and assessments are - by their very nature - a sampling of water flowing by in the stream.¹

Ideally, institutional writing assessment should always strive for more follow-up to quantitative generalizations, for more discussion about particular students who tend to complicate institutional writing assessments, for more balance between institutional reporting of data, which tends to go out to a larger public, and institutional feedback to the students themselves. Institutional writing assessment that claims to measure general student development should privilege and encourage more reflection from individual students as well as from individual classroom teachers.

Typically, students are discussed through narrative, in teacher lore. "Without a question, an academic reflex to hold lore in low regard represents a serious problem... and Practitioners need to defend themselves, to argue for the value of what they know and how they come to know it" (North 55). In contrast, statistical differences in freshmen's writing abilities contrasted to upper level students' writing abilities are often seen as

more reliable bases for decisions made about writing programs. Certainly quantitative research – used sensitively - is useful because legislators and administrators do need to make judgments. However, those “numbers” determined through quantitative assessments must also point teachers back to those individual students who demonstrate personal growth or the lack of it in their writing. Classroom and institutional writing assessment should first benefit students, individually, with care. This principle should become the primary ethic for assessors of student writing. Writing assessment thus seems compromised when its primary purpose is to report results as average scores while ignoring students’ unique needs and voices. While conducting institutional assessment, writing program administrators might be more aware of particular students as unique, not just representatively a “figure” in the “landscape.” This would be a more humane use of writing assessment, to benefit these individual teachers and students, for many teachers do need help in recognizing when growth is present, and many students do need very personal attention with academic writing.

Writing teachers who regularly examine the differences between freshmen writings and junior / senior writers know that - in general - most students mature as individuals and acculturate as a group. Teachers also know that while some students pass individual courses, any skills “unused thereafter is learning that is not developmental” (Haswell 5). Teachers and administrators are both particularly alarmed by any “legend of deterioration.” Personally, I despair that any individual student in our writing classes might actually worsen as a writer after the freshman composition sequence. Most teachers naturally seek to create environments that will presumably help more students in various stages of development through general education and into their disciplinary majors and schools. Most assessments do not fully appreciate those unique environments.

Researchers of WAC and WID have naturally sought out predictable evolutions. These researchers, who often serve as institutional assessors, have sought to characterize transformations that can be articulated as practices which, in turn, can be used to help students to become successful writers in academic setting and beyond. But how helpful have institutional assessments been to most teachers of writing? Within a broader campus environment, with each assessment of student writing, writing assessors look for evidence of continued growth and maturation, or in other words, sustained development. Often, however, the numbers aren’t very impressive, especially to external audiences who might not understand that insignificant gains or even statistical losses could mask qualitative gains in individual students’ writing abilities.

Teachers of writing (and teachers who use writing in inter-disciplinary ways) realize that students must become more adept and rhetorically

flexible, to become “rhetorical chameleons” (Russell). Teachers and assessors of student writing continue to look for ways to characterize most of the students who enter and exit writing programs, and they continue to seek models for integrated and sequenced curriculums that will enable all students to mature and sustain abilities in writing (Haswell). Certainly teachers must rely on broader, institutional assessments, as indicators of general trends, while assessors must rely on teachers in individual classrooms to help most students make the transitions expected during their course of study from general education classes into disciplinary discourses. The challenge that most teachers and assessors face is how, when, and where to share their respective understandings so as to create an environment that will sustain student growth in writing.

Many writing administrators assume that through careful assessment, we can find ways to solve the problems that all students bring to academic writing, especially the problem of sustaining development. We also share a presumption that good teachers can take control of students and their life processes as they move through our classrooms and assignments. Assessments based on a broad sample often lead the classroom teacher to believe that if one could just find the right process, and coordinate the right activities, and introduce the appropriate technologies, one could then manage all of the students’ assets and resources.² But honestly, how much can the individual classroom teacher manage? Longitudinal studies (Walvoord; Sternglass) remind us that there is a good deal of complexity that is permanently beyond our knowledge.

Time presents the first formidable barrier. Across a student’s academic writing career with all the starts and stops, and changes in majors, and distractions from life itself (particularly at non-residential campuses), the likelihood of maintaining and sustaining development in writing abilities does not appear to be very high. Given this complexity, some teachers choose to “live more poorly” by ignoring or refusing to deal with the dilemmas of student writing at all (as some also ignore or refuse to confront environmental dilemmas). Many choose to use well-worn formulas to respond to student writing; for instance, some of my colleagues tell any student who has any kind of problem with writing to go to our writing lab where they expect the student to be fixed and repaired. Some avoid having to deal with student writing altogether. We sense that we cannot even manage our own colleagues in the institution. Anyone who has attempted to spread the doctrine of writing across the curriculum knows that salient fact firsthand. Composition teachers and researchers must begin to think of their institutional and academic transition of students as writers within a larger environment, including the broader, more politically charged ecology.³

The Struggle to Hold to an Interpretative Tale

As the Director of Writing Assessment at my institution, I oversee a junior portfolio requirement that has generally been recognized as a successful institutional writing assessment. But I struggle to make this institutional assessment meaningful to individual students, advisers, and teachers. As a classroom writing teacher myself, I continuously confront the complexities of fostering each student's unique development. Obviously neither one assessment nor one classroom can fully appreciate the fullness of any one student's development as a writer. But this is a sampling of the water in the stream, an analysis of one sample's development in writing, and the potential for using that assessment to improve the teaching of composition skills to particular students. It's not particularly hard to generalize about a particular sample of students, but it is much more difficult to translate those generalities into useful pedagogical practices.

A "Rising Junior Writing Proficiency Portfolio" is currently our primary tool for institutional writing assessment and writing across the curriculum. I will provide a quick timeline as background for the current environmental climate at my institution (which is constantly changing, to be sure). In 1992, our English Department's developmental writing program received commendation from our state Commission on Higher Education for our use of placement testing to develop a strong freshman composition program. In 1995 we were mandated by our state legislature to eliminate all developmental programs. Thus we were forced to abandon the very program that had just been commended.

In place of the developmental program, the English department decided that the time was ripe to develop a "writing across the curriculum" program. Through a campus-wide Writing Inventory in Fall 1995, we proved that sufficient writing was expected throughout the general education curriculum to support WAC. We chose to ignore a problematic drop in sophomore writing. Since we have articulation agreements with community colleges, we have tended to number courses that might actually be sophomore level as 300+ because we are enrollment driven. Ultimately, we determined that sufficient writing took place in general education (courses numbered as 100/200 which I have labeled as WAC courses) as well as in the disciplines (courses numbered as 300/400 which I have labeled as WID courses). Labeling these courses as WAC or WID assures me that both native and transfer students can reasonably expect to have sufficient writing to complete the portfolio requirement in a timely manner (defined as 60-75 hours of course work for native students, or within thirty hours of entering as transfer students).

The English Department thus mandated the "rising junior" proficiency requirement, modeled indirectly after Washington State's portfolio

assessment (Condon), in Fall 1996. I became Director of this assessment while carrying a full load as a teacher in the English Department. Each student submits four papers and a cover essay (for a total of five submissions per portfolio). Because we have a substantial transfer population, we have been flexible about the types of papers being submitted. We also allow for students who expressed dismay about not having enough papers to submit well past the “expected” submission at 60 to 75 credit hours, and many transfer students do indeed delay submission until their final semester.

By Spring of 1998, after we piloted and gathered enough portfolios to begin noticing trends, three types of portfolios could be defined. About one third of the portfolios are “true WAC portfolios,” submitted at 60 hours and characterized by four submissions across general education. These portfolios typically contain papers from English, history, sociology, and a humanities elective (religion, music, drama), thus the WAC designation. Cover essays for WAC portfolios often include rationales for choosing papers from this scattering of courses. In contrast, about one third of the portfolios are submitted after 90 hours. These are characterized by submissions that are related to a discipline, thus the WID designation. Discipline-based portfolios typically come from transfer students who are nursing majors or business majors. Their cover essays often describe a sequence through these students’ upper level course work. Finally, about one third of the portfolios contain a mix of general education and introductions to a discipline. These students typically stress in their cover essays that their most significant work is not seen through the bulk of their portfolios. These students characterize their general education papers as weaker submissions and stress that “real” work is demonstrated by one “best paper,” typically one inclusion from a 300 or 400 level class in their discipline.

Realizing that we had three types of portfolios, we thus began to question could we characterize and distinguish any common traits or peculiarities of students who were negotiating general education from students acclimating to disciplinary identities? Examining individual students’ reflective cover essays (in which they justified four academic writings as demonstration of academic writing competency), we hoped to find overlays of thought about process and products. Could we tease out the students’ development as college writers and “measure the progress” of a predictable evolution or transformation from WAC (writing across the curriculum in the general education curriculum) to WID (writing in the disciplines) through this institutional writing assessment? If so, these understandings could be used in faculty development workshops. Information given in these workshops would be used as “tools” by departments and schools to help individual students explicitly to reflect on the

writing expectations of the disciplines as well as the larger academic community. Ecologically, we surmised that workshop information would “trickle down” to improve the entire environment; those of us with the power of knowledge would share that knowledge with colleagues who would share that knowledge with students. Driven by stewardship and inter-disciplinary motives, institutional writing assessment could thus contribute to the betterment of the commons.

Idealism soon met with problems. Many students definitely had difficulties with self-reflection (Yancey). The rhetorical situation of analyzing themselves as academic writers in a proficiency review required each student to negotiate with audience in problematic and challenging ways (Young). Quickly, and long before these realizations, however, the task of examining the portfolios had become institutionalized, and primarily quantitative.

Our assessment relies on the judgments of a departmental committee of four full time professors (who rotate on and off every three years in a small department). These professors conduct the review of the 300+ portfolios that have come in each of the three years to date. We have no masters’ or Ph.D. program, so we have no graduate students. We each have, on average, 20-25 years of classroom teaching experience in all levels of composition. We all teach freshmen. We all teach upper classmen. For classroom assessments, each of us relies on personal expectations, judgments and reflections.

For our departmental and institutional assessments of student writing, we rely on a holistic rubric, first developed during the 1980’s when we still conducted placement testing for developmental assessments, which we first modified for a Freshman Folder (pre/post) assessment. We further modified and now use this rubric for the Rising Junior Assessment. Our English Department has even wrapped its departmental goal statements around this rubric. We have thus used this scale for departmental assessments (see appendix 3) for many years.

As readers and classroom assessors, this group of professors has read placement tests, freshman folders, and (most recently) rising junior portfolios together for over a decade. Our inter-reader reliability always hits right at 90%. We talk about student papers, we share assignments and concerns, and we deliberate on our goals and objectives in a regular assessment loop. Our students have benefited. This collegial departmental group has obviously had some success with individual students’ transformational tales of sustainable development because of our dual roles as assessors and teachers.

The rub of this institutional assessment is that when the assessment reporting moves away from this group of professors, who know the students firsthand through classroom experiences, to those who do not,

this is when we become victims to the interpretative tale of alienation and deterioration. When communicating our conclusions beyond our first hand experiences with a set of student texts, the tendency to generalize takes precedent over individual needs. We must generalize at some point in order to evaluate. But we must also resist the tendency to generalize, especially when examining the larger community, such as when generalizing about the entire Sample. Within the environment of categorization and numbers, what individual features and students can be highlighted in this assessment? Can the institutional assessor fully realize an ethic of caring when looking at numbers instead of individual students?

Fostering An Evolutionary Tale of Growth

In order to test a “defining characteristics” of WAC, Transitional, or WID portfolios, a sample of 60 students who submitted portfolios in Spring 1999 seemed to serve as a valid and reliable group for analysis. This Sample submitted 60 portfolios containing 300 papers: 60 reflective essays, and 240 papers composed across the curriculum and in the disciplines. Three categories were set up to determine whether or not reading a WAC, WID, or transitional portfolio made any difference in the readers’ judgments. No student should be misjudged in this competency review, and this classification seemed to be the first place to take unique student characteristics into account. While we have worked primarily from this first question of how much impact the categories have on the readers, additional questions have evolved that have led us into a much fuller appreciation of the complexities involved in sustaining individual development within the larger environment.

Our first question concerned the categories that we had begun to realize characterized the submissions. How much impact did reading a “WAC” or “WID” portfolio have? Our Sample entered as freshmen in Fall 1996, yet submitted as “rising juniors” in Spring 1999. Some of the students were indeed “true” juniors; some were “about to graduate seniors” (several had accumulated enough credit hours to have graduated twice, but had transferred, changed majors, or otherwise built up a substantial number of non-degree related credit hours).

A colleague, who directs our institutional writing lab, and I independently categorized these portfolios as WAC, transitional, or WID. Our inter-rater reliability was close to 95% agreement, and we disagreed and debated the differences between WAC and Transitional more than we disagreed about Transitional and WID. After our independent readings and our collaborative debate, we determined that the Sample of 60 students was quantitatively categorized as follows:

- twenty-three (38%) were “WAC”;
- fifteen (25%) were more Transitional (with portfolios that con-

tained primarily WAC papers but demonstrating a definite major focus in at least one paper and in the cover essay); and

- twenty-two (37%) were “WID.”

Admittedly, the categories could not be clearly defined for at least a dozen of the portfolios, particularly since most of the WAC portfolios contain one “transitional” paper in the student’s chosen discipline. On the basis of both the level of the course and the student’s major, a student declaring any major who did not include a paper specifically written for the declared major would be classified as WAC. For instance, a business major who included English, history, sociology, and religion papers would be classified as WAC. In contrast, an English major who included two freshman or sophomore level papers in English or history (200 level) along with two senior level English papers (400 level) would be classified as WID. A nursing major who chose to include two freshman or sophomore level papers in English or history along with two senior level nursing papers would be classified as Transitional. The transitional portfolios typically “house” at least two papers in the discipline. Furthermore, the transitional portfolios tend to explicitly “straddle”; the students seem to be more deliberate in choosing “representative” pieces to demonstrate how their writing is changing as they enter their chosen disciplines. Truthfully, the distinction between WAC and transitional is often not very clear. Enrollment tracking indicates that in fact many juniors and seniors are taking “freshman level” coursework; additionally, some of the choices that freshmen and sophomores make often include upper level courses.

The committee of professors had already met, read, and scored at the time of classification. Each student’s portfolio had been read as part of the Spring submissions for proficiency without any discussion of differing types that might be found. After classification, each group displayed a range of scores on the rubric’s scale of 1 to 5 (weak to strong). Low scores were defined as 2.8 – 3.3; mid range scores were 3.4 – 3.9; high scores were 4.0 – 4.9 (no student scored a perfect 5).

Even though the committee did not realize the categorizations of WAC, Transitional, or WID, on the average, the categories did, in fact, receive differing scores; in fact, there are inverse proportions of low and high scores between the WAC and WID groups.

- 8% of the WAC group had “low” scores;
- 47% of the Transitional group also tended to score “low”;
- 23% of the WID group scored “low.”

- 17% of the WAC group had “high” scores;
- 27% of the Transitional group had “high” scores;
- 32% of the WID group had “high” scores.

A second question arose. In the earlier “Inventory” of faculty across the campus, faculty reported that various genres and writing purposes were being assigned and gathered. Were the actual submissions reflective of the “Inventory”?⁴ We found the obvious; different departments and schools used writing for discipline-based purposes and expected discipline-based formats. Still, most faculty in every discipline and school noted that they relied on a variety of writing activities. For instance, instructors in math and computer science had identified 39 separate classes in which they assigned writing. However, no graphs, tables, email conversations, web pages, or computer programs have appeared in math and computer science students’ junior writing portfolios (see appendix 2).

Additionally, the Inventory survey indicated that instructors in most disciplines were requiring students to submit proposals, outlines, journals, and presentation notes, but none of these have appeared in the portfolio submissions. Generally, many types of writing assignments that seem to foster “writing to learn” are “embedded” or lost in the more formal paper submissions of the portfolio. Students in their cover essays sometimes tell the evaluators that they are deliberately inserting a part of a larger assignment, particularly if the assignment was done collaboratively. Students who detail the processes of assignments also hint at having gone through activities such as note taking and annotations, outlines or abstracts, proposals and presentations, but they only present the finished report or research product for our evaluation. The emphasis on finished product is all too obvious in the portfolio submissions. Thus the portfolio assessment has not provided quantitative evidence that a classroom teacher and proponent of “writing to learn” activities can use to assert that these activities should be used more deliberately across the curriculum and in the disciplines.

Interesting differences do arise when the actual submissions are contrasted to the kinds of writing assignments that instructors reported they gave. The curriculum that we say we offer is different from the curriculum that we see actualized in the submissions. The fact is that students feel that they must submit finished writing, particularly reports and research papers. Furthermore, portfolio submissions do not represent the variety of assignments across the disciplines that the Inventory survey promised, since humanities assignments make up the bulk of the actual submissions (see appendix 1).

To further complicate the Inventory results, some portfolio submissions seem to be hybrids, crosses between the categories assumed by the survey. For instance, an assignment that has regularly appeared in the portfolios submitted by education or nursing majors is a hybrid assignment, a “literature review” that masquerades as a self-reflective piece, typically entitled “My Philosophy of Teaching” or “My Philosophy of Nursing.” This paper is appropriately seen by the student who submitted

it as a report of theorists in the field. Typically this paper is poorly written, lacking structure or development of thought. Yet the professors who assign these papers definitely have some expectations; in general, the nursing faculty want a real literature review, while the education faculty desire a personal narrative in response to the call for “philosophy.”

Some individual students were making obviously poor choices in their submissions. So a third question arose: why did particular students deliberately chose WAC, WID, or transitional submissions? In conferences with each failed student during an appeals process, some have admitted that they had “better” papers in their disciplinary writing than in their general education courses, but they were deliberately passing over their WID papers when submitting their portfolios. Some students seem to deliberately submit WAC papers (particularly English papers) to accommodate English Department readers. Some students in business, nursing, and the sciences do not trust scorers from an English background to read non-humanities papers. Within this institutional assessment requirement, we obviously need to realize and examine some students’ expectations about submitting particular kinds of essays.

Realizing that the portfolios were a treasure trove of information led me next to read through the reflective essays of each of the 60 students in the Sample more closely. During this return to the cover essays, I hypothesized that descriptive traits would be realized (mildly, moderately, or strongly) in each category of portfolio, and I employed the following matrix:

WAC cover essays are characterized by:

- *Expressions of concerns about choice of “topics”;*
- *Expressions of personal interest in individual subjects;*
- *Use of grades to determine value of papers;*
- *Justification of paper by “self engagement” instead of “critical review.”*

Transitional cover essays are characterized by:

- *Expressions of concerns about “process”;*
- *Deliberate use of rhetorical terms;*
- *Expressions of concerns with research elements;*
- *Some display of rhetorical awareness of approaches and modes.*

WID cover essays are characterized by:

- *Justification of topics as “real world applications”*
- *Deliberate use of more audience awareness;*
- *Reliance on jargon appropriate to the discipline;*
- *Expressions of concerns about boundaries or restraints based on instructors’ expectations.*

The Director of our Writing Center and I both read again through each cover essay and made separate notes about the students' reflections about their choices and their abilities as academic writers. We read independently and then compared our notes. We were amazed, truthfully, at how consistent our notes were. We had independently noted almost the same kinds of comments, except that I was more interested in students' reflections about purpose, and he was more perceptive about their reflections on grades. Looking closely at the students' rationales while matching their comments to their scores, we realized that cover essays also demonstrated specific and categorical differences.

The WAC group was especially emphatic about personally justifying and connecting to topics.

- 83% of this group either noted or strongly emphasized topic concerns.
- 50% of the WAC group noted (but none emphasized strongly) any concerns with process, research, or use of rhetorical terminology (and those who were "most concerned about research" tended to be the "low" WAC scorers).
- 25% of the WAC group noted (but none emphasized strongly) any "real world" applications, or used any "jargon" that might be related to a particular discipline, or addressed specific audiences deliberately (instructors or the readers of the portfolios).
- A small group of WAC students at the "low" end (all scoring 3.0) used grades to justify their submissions.

The Transitional group was less emphatic about personally justifying or connecting to topics.

- 73% of this group did note their choices of topics, but only 47% noted their personal involvement with the topics.
- 50% noted concerns with process. This group did express more concern about research elements (60%).
- 40% noted "real world" applications; only 25% addressed audience deliberately.
- 50% seemed to be using "jargon" more deliberately.
- Most significantly, Transitional students seemed more "bound" by the models that we provide in a portfolio kit, especially to students at the "low" end who consistently stressed a desire "to reflect a variety" of choices. Their reflective essays seemed to be more redundant and less

distinctive because of this refrain. Our own directions to the students had been constraining to this group of borderline Transitional students.

The WID group was more sophisticated about process, rhetorical terms, and research.

- 82% of the WID group did mention personally connecting to their topics; only 50% of the group emphasized this connection as their justification for choosing the papers.
- 80% of this group noted or strongly emphasized these points in their reflective cover.
- 80% of this group also emphasized “real world” applications and tended to use “disciplinary jargon” more deliberately.
- More surprisingly, this WID group did not tend to “push against” the boundaries set by instructors or assignments; only a few at the “low” end deliberately rebelled or tested their disciplinary expectations.
- The WID portfolios were additionally, as a group, more likely to use metaphors to describe their choices or their processes.
- WID students were also more likely as a group to express “regret” for having a limited number of suitable papers from which to choose, especially noticing if they had no English papers to submit.
- A group of WID students scoring at 3.3 simply listed choices without any real discussion of personal involvement, process awareness, or discipline specific awareness.

This analysis again forces one to confront the particular limitations of institutional assessment, to query generalizations, and to rethink the problems of realizing conclusions to which only a small group of assessors have access. Ultimately, the numbers, once reported, are less significant than the realities about individual students that one can take back to classrooms and conversations with any other teachers across the curriculum and in the disciplines. But the institutional assessment does have power. “Regardless of context, the kind of assessment ... changes the game. What you design changes what you can learn. And not least, bringing contexts together creates more than the sum of the component parts” (Yancey). Ultimately, the sample taken from the stream becomes factual data to be used to project and predict.

The individuals who made up the Sample could easily be lost. But their voices must be shared. Writing assessment must not lose the student. These students are not just containers of words without an author. They are real students with real frustrations as student writers who would

benefit from individual and sympathetic assessments, whose individual developments must be sustained.

Following are excerpts from six students' cover essays. The first three students represent the lower scores in all three categories of WAC, Transitional, or WID. These students either failed or were judged to be borderline in their writing competency. Regardless of category, all three students still demonstrate that they have sustained some sense of development as writers. Changes are subtle. But the transformations are real. They each demonstrate evolving maturity in their comments about the process of writing and awareness of their audiences and purposes. They could be sustained in this development as academic writers through effective use of assessment and careful teaching.

- An accounting major states: "Each paper (in general education) has a specific reason for being written and chosen" and "each has been a learning experience."
- A second accounting major adds that the portfolio reflects "the wide variety" of courses taken (in the transition from WAC to WID) and concludes: "the assignments were challenging" but the "effect was satisfactory once completed."
- A communications major concludes, "As a student in journalism, I find it very hard to relate to the standards of an excellent 'English' paper," (after) being trained in journalism to write in a different way as a mediator... absolutely forbidden to express my own thoughts."

A second group of three students, who represent the high end of scores in all three categories of WAC, Transitional, and WID, also demonstrate awareness of a learning process, as well as consideration of differing writing expectations across disciplines. In contrast to the previous students' comments, the increased development displayed by these students is subtle, but real. Their development as writers could also be sustained.

- An education major concludes that she was "apprehensive" about the portfolio at first, but realized "why it is so important": "the learning process does not stop (because she) worked for months to correct these papers" to her own "high standards."
- A political science major emphasized that "most of (his) assignments are research based" so he chose deliberately to "illustrate the four types of research (he's) done so far (in political science): literary, interview, survey, and self discovery."

- An English major (who started with a simple listing of “a variety of writing assignments” never noted that she is a graduating senior in English, but all the papers come from upper level English classes. After a sophisticated review of her submissions, which included literary analysis and research, she concluded simply: “I know how to plan, research, draft, write, and revise my writing.”

Simply, we know these students. We have taught them. We have seen them in our offices, our classrooms. Specifically, I have worked with the first three students after they failed their reviews. The most important contrast that I found in my contacts with all of these students was that these three were defensive. In many respects they set the stage for their readers to react as “others” and to judge them more harshly. They were victims of the rhetorical situation.

And because of teacher “lore,” I also know that the sixth student, the English major who scored so highly on her review, suddenly switched her major to psychology two weeks before she was to graduate. She currently has 240 credit hours (having switched from secondary education to English some time ago), but she stopped out of her senior seminar and without speaking to her advisor or her seminar teacher, she redrew her candidacy for graduation and jumped into psychology. Why? The reflective comments suggest why she made this decision, and in hindsight, I see her lack of commitment and her use of the writing process in a very formulaic fashion.

Another significant difference between the lowest and the highest scorer in the WAC category is the fact that the high scorer sought out assistance in our Writing Room since she realized her weaknesses early in her academic career. Yet many of the students who would benefit from Writing Room interventions do not take advantage of this institutional resource. Of course, more questions are now evolving about the role of peer consultants and Writing Room interventions.

Coding and analysis of the Sample have led to additional questions that reach out beyond the classroom into the broader administrative environment as well. In this ecological perspective, this is good and necessary. For instance, if WID portfolios are being submitted substantially “later” in the college career, what effect will reading later submissions have on the scoring of all portfolios? Can we reasonably track enrollment records for students who submit portfolios early and for students who submit portfolios late? More numbers should lead to another need for narratives with implications for retention, another politically charged administrative issue.

One practical question is whether to spend precious research time, while carrying a full teaching load in composition, on examining how “writing to learn” activities can transform individual students between general education courses and writing in their disciplines and sharing those results with my colleagues across my campus. Or is it better to give attention to how students in specific areas – nursing, business – are being asked to address writing assignments that ask them to address conflicting goals such as to report and to reflect? Or is it more efficient to reach out to the administrative and legislative bodies that control funding?

Or is time better spent on individual students? Both classroom and program experiences can support students as they become more rhetorically aware and increasingly confident as writers, even though they struggle when confronted with each new writing situation, as do we all.

Essential questions still nag: what are the connections between our freshman composition courses, between expository and argumentative assignments and the analysis of literature? We even find ourselves as an English department now beginning to grapple with sequencing in our composition program, and questioning what writing in the English major should encompass. I have also begun to walk, gingerly, into the business school with growing awareness about differences between writing in the management track contrasted to writing in accounting. I have had insightful conversations with nursing faculty about their expectations for critical thinking and their attempts to professionalize their discipline by grounding their students in theory. I have begun to explore, with the biologists as well as with the historians, the considerable differences between writing factually or writing interpretively.

Those of us who evaluate especially need to listen to other disciplinary evaluators concerning students’ audience awareness, the quality of their thoughts, uses of sources, organizational strategies, stylistic strategies, and – yes - control of grammar and conventions. English instructors are not the only institutional evaluators of student writing (Yancey). It happens all of the time across this campus, and we need to understand each others’ motives and expectations in more complex and ecological ways.

These are just a sample of what this evolving analysis of a Sample has initiated. What to make of these in terms of a larger discussion, as a program developer, is the next challenge. Significantly, I firmly believe that the metaphors of sustainable development, including stewardship across a common inter-disciplinary environment should prevail. Ecologically, balance should be struck between the generalities of reporting institutional assessments with the specific, often implicit and embedded idiosyncratic character of the teaching individual students.

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Notes

1 Haswell's 1991 analysis of a sample of students in *Gaining Ground* serves as the basis for this analysis.

2 David Orr's *Ecological Literacy* was the catalyst for extending the ecological metaphor.

3 In South Carolina, because higher education is now funded entirely by Performance Indicators that emphasize graduation rates, all funding for developmental programs has been completely eliminated for all four-year and post-graduate institutions. While assessment legislation has not deliberately set out to ignore individual student needs, the program review process and the emphasis on "closing the assessment loop" does lead assessors to use efficient assessments which basically lump and number students. Mandated formats have resulted in closer examination of goal statements and more expectation for demonstrative results. However, results are easily averaged into single numbers, and thus the individual student's needs are easily lost. I have to ask just what does it mean that any student, as a freshman, averages a 3.3 on a scale of 5 while any other student, as a junior, averages a 3.5. I also have to consider that without more demonstrable "profit," the powers that control the purse strings may condemn and seize these grounds where student writing takes place, particularly if these grounds are seen as sites to be mined or taxed.

4 Results of the Fall 1996 Inventory are available at <http://www.usca.sc.edu/uscaonline/wr.wacsurveys>.

Appendix 1: Student submissions by levels

(100 / 200 indicate general education courses; 300 / 400 indicate discipline based courses)

Courses that might be WAC at lower levels or WID (in majors like English): 240 papers total:

Humanities		WAC	Transition	WID	total
(Anthropology/ Communications/	100	37	32	6	75
English/History/	200	18	6	10	34
Music/Philosophy,	300	1	4	9	14
Political science/	400	3	3	9	15
Religion/Sociology/ Spanish/Theater)		—	—	—	—
					138

Sciences		WAC	Transition	WID	total
(Biology/Chemistry/	100	6	6	5	17
Geology/	200	-	2	1	3
Psychology)	300	2	5	4	11
	400	-	-	-	-
		—	—	—	—
					3

Courses that could be seen as “WID” specific (of 240 papers total):

Business		WAC	Transition	WID	total
Accounting/	200	4	-	-	4
Management/	300	3	8	15	26
Economics/	400	-	-	3	3
Finance		—	—	—	—
					33

Education		WAC	Transition	WID	total
(early childhood/	300	2	4	8	14
elementary/	400/	-	2	8	10
secondary/	500	—	—	—	—
exercise science)					24

Nursing		WAC	Transition	WID	total
(associate/ BSN)	100	-	-	2	2
	200	-	-	4	4
	300/400	-	-	8	8
		—	—	—	—
					14

Appendix 2: The students' portfolios contained the following kinds of submissions:

- Information gathering: 10 total
notes from text (0); lectures (1); observations (7); interviews (2)
(Interviews were not addressed in the "Inventory"; nobody turned in class notes.)
- Testing comprehension: 14 total
identifications (1); narratives (1); short essays (12)
(Most acknowledged as "take home finals," one was revised as a "diagnostic.")
- Application: 16 total
outlines (0); abstracts (16); graphs (0)
(Yet outlines and charts often appeared as part of finished papers.)
- Analysis: 2 total
presentation notes (0); surveys (2); computer programs (0)
(Presentation notes were mentioned in some cover essays associated with communication classes, but finished papers were also required).
- Focusing research: 10 total
proposals (0); hypotheses (0); critical review of texts (10)
(Some papers were specifically book reports, especially in history).
- Organizing research: 2 total
lab journals (0); case studies (2); annotated bibliographies (0)
(Again, these are mentioned in cover essays as part of the process associated with finished products but these "writing to learn" assignments are embedded and "lost" with the emphasis on finished papers.)
- Finished products: 163 total
reports (62); essays (41); research/term papers (60)
- Self assessment: 18 total
self critique (4); journals (3); creative writing (5); personal philosophies (6)
(Personal philosophies were not part of the "Inventory" but seem to cross over a line between writing to learn and essays or reports.)
- Correspondence: 5 total
(All of these come from the same class, business writing.)
memos and letters (5); email (0); web pages (0)

	Excellent	Average	Weak
Rhetorical sophistication audience awareness, purpose, voice	5 Positions are clear; complexities and various viewpoints are addressed.	3 Positions are evident, and some attempt is made to accommodate various viewpoints.	1 Lacks position on topics; superficial; little to no addressing of various viewpoints.
Quality of thought logic, evidence and support	5 Unified, and strong control of content; opinions and claims are well-supported with ample evidence.	3 Generally unified; ideas are balanced; opinions and claims are adequately supported.	1 Little evidence of control of ideas; ideas are not supported, or support is cliché / sloganeering.
Use of sources attribution and documentation	5 Sources are clearly identified /synthesized; textual citations and works cited are correct.	3 Mixed use of sources; some synthesis and evidence of citations in text and works cited.	1 Obvious plagiarism; little to no citation of obvious source material in text or works cited; no synthesis of sources.

Structure	unity, coherence, transitions	5	4	3	2	1
		Ideas are well connected through structural and linguistic transitions; structure complements and completes content.	Some evidence of structural and linguistic transitions; structure is generally adequate for the content.	Overall unity and coherence are flawed; parts are poorly connected, and there is little evidence of planning or organization.		
Language	clarity, expression, eloquence	5	4	3	2	1
		Diction and syntax are well-chosen to express ideas; no redundancies.	Acceptable language, although somewhat limited in vocabulary and syntactic fluency	Language errors and limited choices in syntactical forms. Language limits and distracts from expression of ideas.		
Mechanics and usage	grammar, agreement, punctuation, spelling, other _____	5	4	3	2	1
		Grammatical structures are well-chosen; no errors distract from meaning.	Grammatical structures carry the meaning forward, although readers notice an occasional error.	Grammar errors are so obtrusive that readers are seriously distracted by them.		

Appendix 3
Portfolio Rubric