

A Counter Approach to *Academically Adrift*: An Exploratory Study Examining Undergraduate Writing Abilities through Common College Writing Requirements

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Academically Adrift and context of educational reform

Arum and Roksa: criticize higher education for its drift away from the education of undergraduates for the allure of institutional prestige and external funding.

Business leaders lament of recent graduates' lack of broad-based abilities as they transition from higher education to the workplace. Taxpayers and parents fret that students may not be learning skills that "matter" in spite of the increasing the costs of higher ed.

Their main findings: "many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their journeys through higher education" (p. 35) and "students are also likely to leave higher education as unequal, or more so, than when they entered" (p. 37).



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Changes in validity and localism's focus on outcomes

- AERA (1999) and Kane (2006, 2013) articulate the revised concept of validity—the use and interpretation of test scores in particular settings.
- Focus on outcomes—WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Writing and the AACU VALUE Rubrics are examples of efforts that promote localism.
- Blaich and Wise (2010) argue that we should forgo the psychometric purity and use the ‘good enough’ evidence that we can garner from coursework that can “create improvements within the complex governance, social, political and value structures that mark our campuses” (p. 67)



Project Design

This project looks at the feasibility of using course papers from common undergraduate courses that assign writing for outcomes evidence.

Adapted methodology used by Haswell (2000) which was previously applied to impromptu writing exams.

Examined five samples of writing from five distinct curricular points for 30 undergraduates—two impromptu and three course writing samples.



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Methods



All of the papers had been submitted in the university's junior Writing Portfolio requirement.

Portfolios were selected if they included papers from first-year composition; a General Education designated course; a Writing in the Major course. They also had completed a writing placement exam and the timed writing as part of the junior portfolio.

Applied Haswell's multi-dimension construct of writing to the 150 samples of writing in the study which include mean length of sentence; mean length of clause in words; words in free modifiers; words in final free modifiers; length of essay in words; length of the introduction; words greater than or equal to nine letters and a holistic score.

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Profile of course papers

- FYC—Introduction to Academic Writing taught by graduate TAs and adjuncts; 26 students per class; paper length 4-8 pages.

- GER—represent one of eight broad areas; serves introductory function to discipline; taught by graduate TAs, adjuncts and tenure-line faculty; 50-200 students per class; paper length 1-6 pages.

- M-Course—Writing in the Discipline taught by tenure line faculty; 35 students per class; papers varied from 5-25 pages.



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Findings: Course papers

Results from a repeated measures ANOVA comparing writing performance from course papers written at three different points in an undergraduate curriculum

	<u>First-year composition</u>		<u>General Education Course</u>		<u>Writing in the Major</u>		<u>Change Toward Post Graduate Performance (FYC to M course)</u>		
Measure	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p	
1. Length of sentence in words	21.98	3.98	22.94	5.79	21.3	4.19	1.07	.34	-0.68 words
2. Length of clause in words	9.02	1.44	9.36	1.77	9.58	1.69	1.35	.28	+0.56 clause
3. Words in final free modifiers (%)	10.67	6.93	10.26	8.88	9.12	5.18	1.22	.30	-1.55 words
4. Words in free modifiers (%)	23.92	12.46	19.41	8.	19.59	6.3	4.31	.02*	-4.33 words
5. % of essay devoted to introduction (%)	9.63	3.57	10.48	7.25	13.26	5.47	2.10	.09	+3.63 words
6. Length of essay in words	1736.15	644.59	1412.88	683.88	1521.04	772.41	1.87	.17	-215.11 words
7. Words > nine letters (%)	7.23	2.14	8.87	1.67	10.37	3.94	12.30	.00**	+3.14 words
8. Holistic score	4.06	1.37	4.33	1.3	5.08	1.61	5.85	.01**	+1.02 scale points

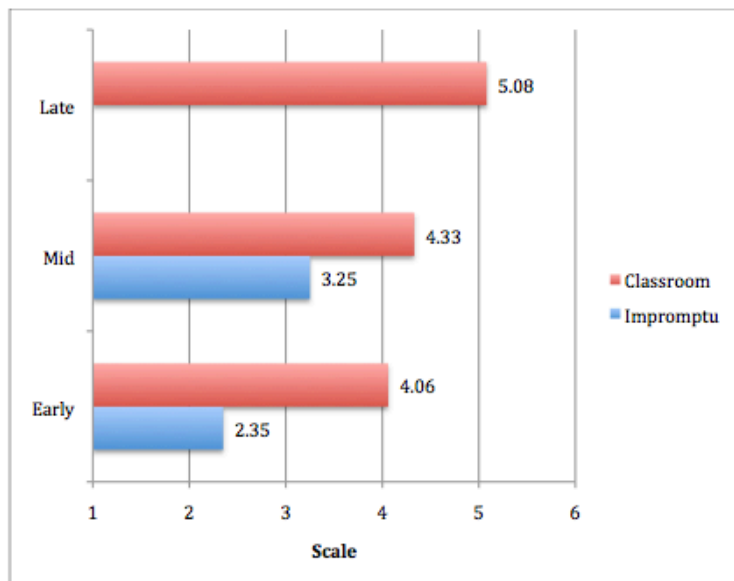
* $p \geq .05$, ** $p \geq .01$

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Findings: Holistic Scores

Figure 1 Comparison of holistic scores across undergraduate curricular points by writing assignment type



- Writing improved significantly between both writing task types.
- Quality of impromptu writing doesn't achieve the same level as writing assigned within the classroom.



Findings: Comparison of impromptu samples to Haswell's (2000) study

Comparison of writing performance on impromptu writing samples composed at matriculation and after 60 credit hours from

Haswell's (2000) study and this project

	<u>Haswell Entry-level</u>		<u>Haswell Rising-junior</u>			<u>Change toward post-graduate performance</u>	<u>Entry-level</u>		<u>Rising-junior</u>			<u>Change toward post-graduate performance</u>
Measure	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p	
1. Length of sentence in words	17.50	4.01	18.91	3.08	.003*	+1.41 words	17.78	3.52	19.29	2.64	.04*	+1.51 words
2. Length of clause in words	9.02	1.73	9.66	1.61	.008*	+0.64 clause	8.57	1.82	9.02	1.64	.13	+ 0.45 clause
3. Words in final free modifiers	7.4 (%)	4.4	11.6 (%)	5.0	.011*	+4.2 total words	9.72 (mean length)	5.74	7.66 (mean length)	4.02	.31	-2.06 total words
4. Words in free modifiers	19.6 (%)	7.0	24.9 (%)	7.3	.000**	+5.3 words	20.28 (mean length)	6.64	16.91 (mean length)	7.20	.05*	-3.37 total words
5. % essay devoted to introduction	14.5	7.8	17.4	8.4	.028	+2.9 words	12.68	5.84	13.21	7.89	.09	+0.53 words
6. Length of essay in words	400	127.2	548.9	169.7	.00**	+148.9 words	740	215.7	962.81	191.04	.00**	+ 222.81 words
7. Words > nine letters (%)	7.5	2.8	8.3	2.5	.029*	+0.8 words	6.2	1.94	13.27	6.82	.00**	+7.07 words
8. Holistic score	3.71 (8-point scale)	1.50	4.72 (8-point scale)	1.55	.00**	+1.01 scale points	2.35 (6-point scale)	1.27	3.25 (6-point scale)	.73	.00**	+0.9 scale point

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Limitations



- Small sample.
- Study conducted at a site of a well-established writing across the curriculum program.
- Amount of work to code the materials is prohibitive to easy replication.



Implications



- Rogers asserts that “writing develops in multidimensional and nonlinear ways in higher education...the bulk of... detectable changes exhibited by developing writers are arguably best viewed as movement toward greater levels of participation in particular communities of practice” (p. 375).
- Score patterns illustrate this.
- “Good enough” evidence to use for accountability purposes to demonstrate gains in student learning.

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Looking Ahead

Slomp (2012) says assessing writing is “more difficult when our focus shifts from assessing products (the artifacts that point to writing ability) to tracing the trajectory of one’s development over time and across contexts....These challenges include defining a theory that accounts for the complex array of factors that influence development; defining a workable construct to measure the development of writing ability; and methodological challenges involved in assessing writing through the lens of complex developmental theories and their associated constructs” (p 82).

- Common undergraduate curricular points that are part of WAC/WID requirements are a potential significant source of local evidence to demonstrate student learning outcomes.
- Since these points are connected to the classroom, assessment is not separated from instruction, and so they have the potential to serve as sites to influence teaching and learning.
- What are the possibilities in employing this local model in other locations?

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Questions and discussion



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