

office of **Academic Planning & Assessment**
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Faculty Focus on Assessment

This issue: The Writing Across the Curriculum Assessment Group (WAC WAG) discuss how they developed learning objectives for junior year writing.

“Our primary aim was to develop a set of objectives that would be useful for planning junior year writing program courses and for evaluating students in those courses.”

– Anne Herrington,
Professor of English



WAC WAG Faculty (l-r): Linda Laduc, Laura Doyle, Donna Zucker, Bill Mullin, Julian Tyson

With the increased interest in assessment both at the state level and on-campus, a group of junior year writing faculty, representing Physics, Chemistry, Business, English, Composition, and Nursing were brought together to articulate a set of learning objectives that would be useful for planning junior year writing program courses and for evaluating students in those courses. The Writing Across the Curriculum Writing Assessment Group (WAC WAG) was the first group on campus to consider institutional-wide assessment of writing.

Phase I: Finding Common Learning Objectives

“I got involved in this exercise so I could hear the thoughts and philosophies of faculty involved in junior year writing in other programs. There are few people to talk to about writing in Chemistry, so this project helped me more clearly articulate goals for my Writing in Chemistry course.”

– Julian Tyson, Professor of Chemistry

Funded by the President’s Reserve Fund and the Office of Academic Assessment and Planning, the WAC WAG faculty began their two-year project in Fall 1999. Anne Herrington explains the philosophy that underpinned the project: “Assessment assumes clarity about ends, and in this case, those ends were learning objectives. So learning objectives were our starting point.”

WAC WAG faculty began the process of identifying common learning objectives by reading student writing. Bill Mullin, Professor Emeritus of Physics, explains the process, “One of the things we tried to do was to read each others’ students’ papers and ask, ‘could we judge this paper on some objective basis?’” Laura Doyle, Associate Professor of English, continues, “we talked quite openly about what was working in a paper and what was not and then worked inductively from that to draw out what our criteria were for judging the writing.” Those criteria

became the basis for determining what the goals were for the assignment. By rooting the process of identifying learning objectives in student writing, the learning objectives criteria grew organically out of the ways faculty read students’ work.

Faculty articulated those common learning objectives in a *Statement of Learning Objectives*. The *Statement of Learning Objectives* divides objectives into “basic skills,” skills that students bring to the junior year writing classroom, and “advanced composing and thinking skills,” skills that students develop in junior year writing. WAC WAG faculty concur that agreeing on basic skills was fairly straightforward, but the advanced skills were harder to define. Students are asked to think in different ways in the different disciplines, and their writing reflects those differences. The mastery skills had to reflect the various thinking processes required in the disciplines.



The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas: ■ **Developing evaluation plans** for new programs, grant proposals, and externally and internally funded projects ■ **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program ■ **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals ■ **Developing strategies** for ongoing reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation, and other purposes.

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Phase II: Developing Criteria for Assessment

“At the core, identifying learning objectives is about good pedagogy. Using learning objectives is a way of knowing if you’ve accomplished your objectives, especially in a writing course, which people normally think of as subjective.”

– Linda Laduc, Business Communications Program Director

In the second phase of the WAC WAG project, faculty developed criteria for evaluating student writing. In drafting *Criteria for Assessment*, the group wanted to ensure that the assessment methods they suggested would help other teachers improve student writing. As a result, the group returned to students’ work to base assessment criteria on actual examples

of UMass student writing. WAC WAG faculty read samples of student writing from junior year writing courses and then ranked the samples based on the learning objectives. The ranking process helped the group refine the language of the learning objectives and develop their guidelines for assessing writing.

What’s Really Important: Finding Common Ground Among Faculty

Since the WAC WAG group completed their project last year, their work has been published through the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment.

Establishing Learning Objectives: Applications for Course Planning and Assessment has been used in planning junior year writing courses and has been reviewed by the University Writing Committee.

The Writing Across the Curriculum Writing Assessment Group agree that the richest part of the WAC WAG experience was bringing faculty together to talk about teaching. Anne Herrington says, “Learning about each other’s

courses helped bring into relief what is sometimes so naturalized in our own courses and disciplines that we don’t ‘see’ it, for example, assumptions about types of writing, audiences, and purposes for writing.” For other group members, the WAC WAG experience made them more reflective about the kinds of writing that they value in their courses. Donna Zucker, Clinical Assistant of Nursing explains, “I read assignments that I would never dream of in my discipline, but I saw how each assignment on a syllabus was fulfilling at least one of the learning objectives.”

Establishing Learning Objectives: Applications for Course Planning and Assessment is available on-line at <http://www.umass.edu/oapa/oapfiles/oapaindex.html> under Assessment Handbooks and Other Resources.

Advice

“The product of this initiative seems obvious but the process was incredibly rich. You want other faculty to arrive here through this process, not simply read the end product. This process is a testimony to people talking about writing instruction.”

– Laura Doyle
Associate Professor of English

The WAC WAG group offers the following advice for other faculty interested in developing their own junior year writing courses:

- Use the *Establishing Learning Objectives* handbook as a guide for developing your own course and evaluation criteria.
- Talk with other faculty about teaching writing.

- In developing objectives and assessment methods for your writing course, reflect on your own teaching practice.
- Translate the learning objectives into language that is meaningful to faculty in your discipline, and share the objectives in the handbook with teaching assistants and adjunct faculty.

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WAC WAG member:
Anne Herrington

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