

Testimony
INTERIM EDUCATION COMMITTEE
By Kimberly Gutierrez, Assistant Professor of English
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Interim Education Committee:

My name is Kimberly Gutierrez, and my title at Bismarck State College is Assistant Professor of English. Prior to joining the BSC faculty, I taught freshman and developmental composition for seven years in three different California community colleges. My current teaching duties at Bismarck State College include instructing students in first year (freshman) composition courses, developmental composition courses (a pre-freshman composition course designed for students whose ACT English score was not high enough to enter freshman composition), development reading, and English “lab” courses. As an instructor who has been teaching at BSC since 2011, I was invited to participate in the Vertical Alignment meetings that sought to pinpoint the Common Core (CC) Standards for writing, reading, speaking/listening, and language for 11th and 12th grade English classes that overlap or indicate a shortfall with the current standards for the NDUS freshman compositions classes (first and second semester, titled English 110 and 120). These meetings took place in the summers of 2013 and 2014 at Valley City State University, and participants included high school teachers from across the state of North Dakota, as well as NDUS two-year college instructors and NDUS university professors. My testimony will cover the following and is based on materials gleaned from participation in the Vertical Alignment Committee and from my own professional experience:

1. Findings of the Vertical Alignment Committee (**Appendix A**)
2. Examples of Fluency between the CC Writing Standards and the NDUS Outcomes for First and Second Semester Freshman Composition (**Appendix A** and **Appendix B**)
3. Follow-up to Findings: Rubric Creation (**Appendix C**)
4. Standards and beyond: Thoughts from My Own Experience in Teaching Developmental and Freshman Composition Courses.

1. Findings of the Vertical Alignment Committee

The committee concentrated first on understanding the CC standards for Writing, Reading, Speaking/Listening, and Language. Once delving through those, we reviewed the NDUS Outcomes, which serve as a type of standard or minimum expectation, for the English 110 and 120 students in NDUS colleges and universities. These outcomes had been widely used in the NDUS system, and as such, they served as a good comparison point: by paralleling the CC standards to the NDUS standards, we reasoned that we could get a clear idea of what competencies students would optimally have upon leaving 12th grade and what competencies students would be expected to have upon completing English 110 and English 120. The goal was to examine the CC Standards compared to the expectations for English 110 and English 120, with the understanding that the outcomes for English 110/120 were competency goals upon the completion of the respective courses. We tasked ourselves to look for gaps in competency expectations for high school and the beginning of college.

We also understood that the CC Standards for Writing, Reading, Speaking/Listening, and Language had not been implemented in the school systems for North Dakota when our group met in 2013, so we were studying potential gaps and overlaps based on the theory that the CC Standards could and would be successfully implemented and students would actually achieve the competency goals outlined in the CC Standards.

The committee used the NDUS Outcomes for English 110 as the starting point, and then sifted through the CC Standards to find parallel competency goals. Appendix A is the result of the group's findings. Each of the NDUS Outcomes for English 110 and 120 have been connected to a corresponding CC Standard. Upon completing the task, several committee members were in agreement with the statement that if successfully implemented, the CC Standards would present no skill gap between high school and college. Indeed, the Standards pinpointed by the committee seemed to very successfully prepare high school students for college level writing. In fact, the statement was made that the CC Standards studied by the group, if successfully learned by the majority of high school students in the North Dakota secondary setting, could lead to the colleges considering a more advanced approach to the first level freshman composition course.

2. Examples of Fluency between the CC Standards and the NDUS Outcomes for First and Second Semester Freshman Composition Students

The work completed by the committee is best understood by looking at a couple of examples. The first listed outcome from the NDUS English 110 Course focuses on rhetorical awareness (Appendix A, Page 1). Item 1 on this page pinpoints “Write academic texts with a strong awareness of rhetorical situation and effectively use a variety of rhetorical strategies to suit audience, purpose, and context. Following this outcome is “W.4” in parenthesis. By turning to Appendix B, the CCSC for Writing, the right side column of Page 2, Item 4 lists the standard that aligns to the previous outcome listed: “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” The notation that follows that standard clarifies: “Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.”

The key words noted in standards 1-3, the “grade specific standards” that align with the NDUS outcomes’ wording of “rhetorical purpose” are “Write arguments to support claims” (Appendix B, Page 1, Standard 1), “Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information” (Appendix B, Page 1, Standard 2), and “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique” (Appendix B, Page 1-2, Standard 3). Upon entering college, a student is not expected to already have a “strong rhetorical awareness” because that goal is part of the expected competency of a English 110 student who has successfully completed the course. The student is, however, expected to already possess a clear understanding that different rhetorical purposes are used by employing differing writing types. Standards 1-3 outline three different writing types that are the competency goals for 12th grade students. Thus, the competency goals for the end of 12th grade align with what is expected of students upon entering freshman composition, in particular, their understanding of “rhetorical awareness.”

A second example can provide another glimpse into the committee’s examination of the fluidity between the CC standards and the NDUS outcomes. Appendix A lists the category of “Evidence and Focus” on page 2. The fifth item listed notes the competency

detailed as “Use information resources ethically and honestly, preserving the meaning and documenting the use of the source in the style appropriate to the course.” The CC standard that is listed as paralleling this NDUS outcome is “W.8,” which contains the key words “Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources...integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism” (Appendix B, Page 2). The NDUS outcome of “ethical” and “honest” use of sources aligns with and flows out of the CC standard of “avoiding plagiarism.” The concept of “preserving ideas” noted in the NDUS competencies is paralleled with the CC standard wording of “integrate the information of into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas.” Also listed in both competencies is the notion of formatting sources according to the standard citation format for the course.

3. Follow-up to Findings: Rubric Creation (Appendix C)

The logical question to follow a study of competencies or standards is to posit how the student achievement of the competencies can be measured. Thus, a final purpose of the Vertical Alignment Committee was to develop a measurement tool for the purposes of assessing successful attainment of the basic course outcomes for English 110. Appendix C is the product of the discussions revolving around how writing can be assessed to look for successful understanding and application of the NDUS English 110 competencies, which were already aligned as a natural outcropping of the specifically noted CC standards for writing, reading, speaking/listening, and language.

Appendix C contains the rubric that might be used to evaluate an overall program’s success in meeting the competencies. Page 1 notes that these competencies are “not aspirational but minimally successful” standards for students to meet upon completion of English 110. The rubric is suggested to be used in classrooms to “think about how assignments and tasks line up with or lead to overall course competencies.” The overall purpose, then is to use the rubric as a guideline for authentic writing assignments that could be graded in a holistic manner with the backdrop of overall course expectations.

Looking at the rubric’s categories on Page 2, many of the same elements listed in the CC standards and in the NDUS competencies for English 110 are included, such as

rhetorical situation, purpose, sources and evidence, just to name a few. The understanding in using rubrics is that writing assessment will stem out of real and meaningful student writing activities, which tend to be the most relevant in assessing student achievement of the skills.

4. Standards and beyond: Thoughts from My Own Experience in Teaching Developmental and Freshman Composition Courses.

Rubrics are a form of assessment writing teachers use to assess authentic writing activities, and depending on the rubric, instructors can pinpoint what they wish to assess, whether the focus is fluid use of sources, rhetorical devices, language use. The development of the rubric by the Vertical Alignment Committee underscores the key essential element that precedes the use of a rubric, that of authentic writing on the part of students. Freshman and developmental composition courses should, by competency goals set in the course syllabus, contain many and varied writing opportunities that provide the instructor an opportunity to holistically and formally evaluate individual student understanding and application of the competencies.

In preparation to apply writing skills to life settings or to apply writing skills within the college course environment, high school writing assignments should incorporate many and varied writing assignments that present the instructors with opportunities to holistically and formally evaluate individual student progress along the paradigm of the standards set forth by the district. This is where my own experience and years of listening to colleagues voice concerns propels me to take a few moments to share perspectives that can illuminate our own use of standardized testing to assess writing abilities in children and adolescents.

A shared concern among many of my colleagues is the “high stakes” testing environment that can ensue from a yearly or bi-yearly application of standardized testing that is used to pinpoint the skill level of a particular student. The term “high stakes” develops out of the general idea that the score on the single standardized test at one or two times during the school year can fairly accurately determine the progress of a student, or even the effectiveness of a program, school, or district.

My own teaching career started in elementary education in the Los Angeles basin in 1989. Common Core standards had, obviously, not become a major focal point of the national educational or political dialogue at that time, but California had preceded the basic idea of standards-based education assessed on a yearly basis and implemented its own form of state standards, along with standardized tests to measure the achievement of those standards. Thus, in California, “standards based” education, that of teaching certain competencies at specific levels of elementary and secondary education, soon broadened to incorporate the assessment portion of the standards that were implemented, a California standardized test that was to be administered in April of each year.

What started out as a seemingly very sound policy of striving for students to achieve certain skills by a certain level of education soon shifted, with the focus turning to how effectively the students could perform on the test. Two results occurred. First, testing became an important focus within the districts and individual schools. Test scores were public information, and eventually the scores were published in local newspapers. The pressure on individual schools mounted, and “test taking” strategies became the focus of instruction from January until the test-taking date in April. With only so many hours of instruction in a day, spending valuable instructional and homework hours employing the students in test taking strategies turned the focus away from holistic and authentic learning, such as might be gleaned from authentic writing and reading activities, in order to teach reading and writing “through test taking practice.” This is what is referred to as “high stakes testing,” the type testing environment that drives the choice of curriculum instead of the other way around, the curriculum driving the testing.

This past week, I attended a four-day conference for the National Council of Teachers of English in Minneapolis. Speakers and attendees were present from across the United States, many of whom are elementary, middle or high school educators. What I discovered during the conference is that the theme of concern over assessment driven curriculum as opposed to authentic learning and assessment continues in the K-12 educational setting. New York City provides yet another example of concerns over authentic reading and writing activities paired with assessment. During NCTE conference sessions, I had a chance to listen to Pam Allyn, who co-authored *Every Child Is a Superhero* with Dr. Ernest Morrell, the sitting president of the National Council of

Teachers of English. Ms. Allyn spoke of New York City's incorporation of holistic assessment stemming from authentic student reading and writing activities in response to the high stakes standardized testing that had come to dominant curriculum decisions and beyond. New York had invested so heavily in their reliance of the standardized test results, school- and even teacher-evaluations were impacted by student scores. Many administrators and teachers in New York City were concerned at the emphasis put on the test results because, as most teachers realize, standardized tests are not always able to accurately capture the true amount of student learning that occurs. As Ms. Allyn pointed out, standardized testing is valuable for viewing trends, but to truly know how much a child is learning in reading and writing, children must be assessed holistically and authentically as well, which is exactly what New York City's district instituted.

Again, I am not disparaging standardized testing as a means for assessing; however, I am posing some different scenarios in which standardized testing drove the curriculum and, thus, the learning, instead of the curriculum driving the learning and ultimately the test. These scenarios can serve as an important reminder for us in North Dakota as we embark on the new standards-driven curriculum choices. We can remember that not every child or adolescent responds well to the testing environment, and as such, the standardized reading and writing test may not demonstrate the true reading and writing levels. We can make careful and deliberate choices about how to balance the emphasis and value placed on the standardized testing, seeking to augment that type of assessment with holistic and authentic assessments of reading and writing skills to gain a clearer picture of true student learning.

Mr. Chairman, this completes my testimony. I am available to address any questions from the committee. Thank you.

APPENDIX

Appendix A:
Findings from Vertical Alignment Committee Meeting
June 2013

Appendix B:
Common Core Writing Standards, Grades 9-10 and 11-12
Common Core Reading Standards, Grades 9-10 and 11-12
Common Core Speaking/Listening Standards, Grades 9-10 / 11-12
Common Core Language Standards, Grades 9-10 and 11-12

Appendix C:
English 110 Writing Rubric Sample
Vertical Alignment Committee Meeting
June 2014