**Writing and Critical Thinking Skills One Year After ENGL 11000 or FIQWS: A Comparison**

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 Executive Summary

To study the impact of the new General Education requirement (GE), in particular the FIQWS

component, we studied a matched sample of 66 freshmen in the cohort of Fall of 2007, half of whom took FIQWS in their first semester (“New”), and the other half ENGL 11000 (“Old”). The groups were

matched on grade in FIQWS or ENGL 11000, area of the major (Humanities & Arts, Social Science,

Education, Undecided), and, as much as possible, gender. We then studied their writing and critical

thinking skills as perceived by their instructors in writing intensive courses they took in the Fall of 2008.

Data collection took place from mid-December 2008 to end of February 2009. We also studied retention

into the Spring 2009 semester, and academic achievements of both groups after one year: GPA and

credits obtained.

The instructors were asked how they perceived the students on a number of writing and critical thinking

skills, and how they would grade the students on writing and critical thinking (Appendix 1).

The writing skills were defined as the ability to: Express ideas clearly in writing, develop an argument in

writing, use and cite outside source material in an essay, write a research paper.

The critical thinking skills were defined as the ability to: Analyze texts or other materials, synthesize or

restate ideas, articulate two sides of an argument, and active engagement in thinking critically about the

subject of the course.

To be able to take into account possible differences, we compared the educational background of both

groups (High school type and achievements, SAT, Regent’s, CUNY ACT scores, and SEEK status). We

found no background variables that were a) differently distributed among the “Old” and “New” groups,

and b) had a direct effect on the writing and critical thinking skills as perceived by the instructors. That is, differences in educational background between the groups had no direct effect on perceived skills, and educational background variables that had a direct effect on perceived skills were evenly distributed

among the “Old” and “New” groups. This enhances the probability that any differences between the

groups on perceived skills and academic achievements, can be attributed to the nature of the Gen Ed

requirement (i.e. “Old” or “New”).

To compare the matched groups, we used the Wilcoxon signed ranks test for two related samples, the

non-parametric equivalent of the paired-samples T-Test. The Wilcoxon test was used because of the

relatively low number of pairs. For dichotomous variables we used Fisher’s Exact Test (1-sided).

Significance levels were set at p<=.10, because of the relatively low numbers. Using lower levels of

significance with low numbers raises the risk of considering a valid difference not significant.

The findings indicate there are almost no significant differences in perceived writing and critical thinking skills between the “Old” and “New” groups, with the exception of the ability to write a research paper, on which the “New” group scored significantly higher than the “Old” group. There were no significant differences in GPA and credits obtained after 1 year as well, but retention from the Fall 2008 into the Spring 2009 semester was significantly higher for the “New” group. In general, the “New” groups scored slightly higher than the “Old” group on all skills and assigned grades, but the differences were not statistically significant.

To exclude “regression to the mean” effects, we repeated the analyses without the pairs of students who received an “A” or “A-“ in FIQWS or ENGL 11000. This resulted in more pronounced differences

between the “Old” and “New” groups. The “New” group now scores significantly higher than the “Old”

group on not only the ability to write a research paper, but also on writing skills overall (the average over the four writing skills), and the grade the instructor would give on writing skills. The differences in

perceived critical thinking skills become more pronounced as well, with the “New” group now scoring

significantly higher on the ability to synthesize or restate ideas. The difference in retention remains

significant. The findings also mean that the seven “A” students in the “New” group did worse in their

follow-up courses than their matches in the “Old” group, although all of them still had satisfactory GPA’s

and numbers of credits after one year, and were all retained in the Spring of 2009. It appears that the “A” students in the “New” groups were somewhat a-typical, which could have been a coincidence.

All in all, the results show a hopeful impact of the new Gen Ed requirement as compared to the old one,

especially on writing skills as perceived by instructors in courses one year after taking the introductory

FIQWS or ENGL 11000 course. Next steps would be to repeat the study, among the same and among

larger groups, by comparing CPE scores instead of instructor perception. This will determine if the

positive impact remains, and/or whether differences that are not significant in the small group, will

remain the same and become significant in a larger group.

An even more stable positive impact could also be achieved by ensuring that instructors and students are aware of the relevant learning outcomes, by including them explicitly on the syllabus in student-centered language, and systematically checking and discussing with the students to which extent the learning outcomes have been achieved, and what indicates poor, satisfactory, good and excellent achievement of a learning outcome (rubric).

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Questions for instructors

Answer scale:

Much worse Worse Slightly worse Not better, not worse Slightly better Better Much better

N/A / don’t know

Writing

How do this student’s writing skills compare to those of other City College freshmen and sophomores you taught?

1-The ability to express ideas clearly in writing.

2- The ability to develop an argument in writing.

3-The ability to use and cite outside source material in an essay.

4-The ability to write a research paper.

5-According to the standards you normally apply, what letter grade would you give this student on writing skills?

Please provide your grade here:

 Critical Thinking

How do this student’s critical thinking skills compare to those of other City College freshmen and sophomores you taught?

6-The ability to analyze texts or other materials.

7- The ability to synthesize or restate ideas.

8-The ability to articulate two sides of an argument.

Compared to other City College sophomores and freshmen you taught:

9-Does this student seem actively engaged in thinking critically about the subject of your course?

10-According to the standards you normally apply, what letter grade would you give this student on critical thinking skills?

Please provide your grade here: