GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT REPORT

Purpose
Analysis of writing assignment prompts in General Education courses

Materials used, n:
40 assignments from ANTH 101, 201, THTR 131, 211, 212, 213, SPAN 283, WCIV, WHUM, MUS 101, 102, 145, USSO, ECO 10250

Rubric/Scoring standard used:
Rubric for writing assignment prompts

Date of assessment:
June 2016

Report by:
Alec Magnet and David Plick (English), Ana Vasovic, General Education

GOALS
The goal of his project was to review the writing assignment prompts in General Education courses in order to determine the types of assignments given and if they are crafted to effectively elicit the desired response from students. This activity was part of a larger assessment project to evaluate the effectiveness of the General Education curriculum in terms of student learning Flexible Core courses. The assessment focused on student learning in the areas of writing, critical thinking and information literacy as well as within the content area of the particular courses.

OVERVIEW
Instructors teaching MUS 101, 102, 145, THTR 131, 211, 212, 213, SPAN 283, WHUM, ANTH 101, 201, ECO 10250, USSO and WCIV in spring 16 semester responded to the request to submit samples of students’ essays along with the assignment prompts.descriptions. All instructors who had indicated an interest in participating in assessment were invited to participate as essay readers and scorers. Two instructors from English were asked by the Gen Ed Director to also evaluate the assignment prompts for their clarity and effectiveness. The following criteria were used:
1. What is the purpose of the assignment (e.g., review knowledge already learned, find additional information, synthesize research, examine a new hypothesis)? Is it explicit?
2. How well does the assignment fit with the course learning outcomes? Writing skills, critical thinking skills, research & info literacy, mastery of concepts or texts
3. What is the required form/genre (e.g., expository essay, lab report, memo, business report, research paper, analytical paper, literature review, response)
4. What mode is required for the assignment (e.g., description, narration, analysis, persuasion, comparison, argument, a combination of two or more of these)?
5. Does the assignment specify:
   ✓ expectations of form/genre and mode (e.g. thesis statement, direct quotes, course concept or keywords)
   ✓ explicit command words in instructions (e.g., “compare and contrast” and “explain” are more explicit than “explore” or “consider”)
   ✓ what the paper’s main focus should be (or the scaffolding process by which students will find their own main focus) Is the guidance clear (not enough, too much, confusing)?
   ✓ the length requirements
   ✓ the amount and type of research expected
   ✓ deadlines/scaffolding
   ✓ evaluative criteria
**FINDINGS:** N.B. The findings of this report are somewhat incomplete because between a third and a half of the assignment sheets reviewed were themselves incomplete. Almost none of the cover notes seemed to include all the information given to students. Three included no useful information at all. A further six assignments seemed like brief descriptions of more elaborate instructions. At least one was missing pages.

From the information obtained:

1. All prompts state the purpose of the assignment explicitly
2. All assignments engage students’ writing skills; almost all (38/40) engage students’ critical thinking skills; only about 30% (11/40) of the assignments involved research skills, and; all required demonstration of mastery of concepts/texts from the discipline.
3. In terms of genre, patterns emerged among different Gen Ed categories, so that courses in the Creative Expression (CE) mostly assigned reviews/reports/reflections on performances while World Cultures and Global Issues (WCGI) and US History courses primarily assigned analytical or research papers.
4. Similarly, in terms of assignment modes, Creative Expression courses favored description, but also involved analysis and sometimes critique and argument development. WCGI essays involved primarily analysis and argument with WHUM courses often including comparison and contrast mode.
5. Specific instructions:
   - Only a 40% (16/40) of the prompts specify genre and mode of the assigned essay, often minimally.
   - Slightly more than half (23/40) provide specific command words in their instructions to students.
   - 70% (28/40) state what the main focus of the assignment should be.
   - About 85% of the prompts (33/40) specify the expected length of the essay; the lengths varied greatly - from 1 to 9 pages - with the majority being 3-4 and 5-6 page assignments. Short essays were usually assignments meant to lead to a longer essay.
   - Of the 11 assignments requiring research, only 7 specified the amount of research expected.
   - While most of the prompts submitted to the Gen Ed office did not include deadlines, it is assumed that they are specified to students. A few assignments included scaffolding process.
   - Only 20% (8/40) prompts specify evaluative criteria.

**Assignments (in summary):**
- answer a question using info from several texts
- use principles of microeconomics to clarify a campaign issue
- apply knowledge, describe and reflect on concert experience
- apply knowledge, find additional information, describe and reflect on concert experience;
- apply knowledge, analyze and review a performance, present an argument
- critique a performance
- review a performance
- apply knowledge, analyze and review a performance
- analyze a literary text as historical evidence
- analyze text and place in historical context
- analyze a literary text as historical evidence
- summarize
- analyze a Biblical theme in a film
- Draw on course reading to discuss the utility and wisdom of violence and revenge
- find & interpret info, develop argument
- apply a theme to an ancient culture
- review & apply knowledge, develop & argue position
- apply knowledge, synthesize research, analyze contemporary daily life
analyze texts, translate poem, write poem, reflect on writing
explore a theme in one or two literary texts, apply terms (archetypal reading)
analyze a text
analyze text, compare & contrast
answer questions about a text
analyze text, compare & contrast, research
explore how a human problem is presented by a number of texts
analyze text, compare & contrast, chart evidence
apply terms, analyze text
apply terms, analyze text, distinguish summary from analysis, develop paragraph structure
compare & contrast theater of 3 cultures
review and apply knowledge
Support design/presentation choices using evidence from outside sources

CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION
Assignments are generally thoughtful and designed to provoke thinking. They generally use command words, but overall Gen-Ed classes don’t seem to require a lot of research. When instructors do require outside sources, it is rarely clear what kinds of sources they want and where the students should get them. Since our students tend to struggle in finding/evaluating verifiable data and, if not given boundaries, will use "Yahoo Answers" and howstuffworks.com, they should receive guidance on research methods (they are supposed to receive this in FIQWS and Comp II, but some reinforcement would be great so the students don’t feel like they receive contradictory approaches to academic work).

Teachers sometimes aren't clear on the mode/form/genre, so the intent that the student should have is muddled/confusing. Sometimes the directions would say, "discuss" and "explain" (but don't give summary ...) but then also "argue" and have a thesis statement. These are contradictory instructions. Discussing and/or responding to a subject aren't arguing/taking a position on a subject and defending it.

In some assignments there's too much hand holding (i.e., telling the student what to think, or leading them to think a certain way) which stifles the students’ creativity and critical thinking, while others may give directions which are confusing/contradictory/vague. An assignment should explain a process to tackle the paper, but also leave the students with the freedom to develop their own ideas. A couple of assignment sheets included a lot of "don't do this" "don't do that" having a somewhat negative feel to them which might impact the students’ excitement to do the work.

RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Organize faculty development workshops. A few themes emerge very clearly from the assignment prompts reviewed and would make excellent topics for workshops on how (and why) to use particular techniques:

   • Scaffolding: Very few assignment sheets include any scaffolding or preliminary assignments at all. Only a very few explicitly spell out a sequence of assignments clearly aimed at teaching specific aspects of the writing or thinking process and building toward the final draft. Separating out one or two aspects of content or process allows instructors to teach writing technique in a more focused way and produces better papers.

   • Rubrics and evaluative criteria: Almost none of the assignments include rubrics that break the final grade down into its component parts. A few describe the general criteria on which papers will be graded, often in fairly broad terms (“argument,” “use of materials,” “grammar”). Describing the criteria of evaluation in detail can be helpful to both students and instructors. When instructors
articulate exactly what we expect of our students on a given assignment, we often clarify for ourselves what skills and topics we need to spend time explaining and modeling in the classroom—and building into our scaffolding assignments as well.

• **What Is Analytic Writing?** A few assignment sheets do an excellent job explaining the key terms and moves of analytic or critical or argumentative writing, but many just assume them. A few seem even to assume that students will figure out that they should present such an argument without being told to do so. Some ask lists of questions (which often prompts students to answer those questions in order). Some ask students to give their opinions without requiring explanation or support. Critical thinking and argumentative writing (which go together closely) are two of the main learning outcomes that our Gen Ed curriculum hopes to achieve. We can’t do so without explicit instruction in what those practices are and in how to do them.

• **What Are Our Writing Assignments For? What Sorts of Writing Are We Asking For?** A number of the assignments are unclear about the purpose, genre, or mode of the writing they assign, or else they provide vague or multiple purposes, genres, and modes. Some assignments suggest one purpose, genre, or mode somewhere on the sheet and then contradict or confuse that statement elsewhere. One even defined the assignment as a review in the first paragraph and then declared that students were not writing a review in the last. This ambiguity may reflect a larger confusion about what the purpose of assigning any particular writing task is in the first place. One interesting result of the outcomes assessment meetings this summer indicated a growing thoughtfulness about what particular assignments actually do, what we want them to do, and how to get there. Further workshopping and discussion on those topics would be all to the good.

II. **Provide instructors with assignment prompt template (see suggested template below).** Another useful resource to provide instructors—especially first-time instructors—would be assignment prompt templates. These might include prompts for basic information such as due dates, length requirements, and how to hand the paper in. They also might encourage instructors to explain the purpose and mode of the assignment, to explain how they will score it, or to develop a series of scaffolding assignments. Instructors who found that they didn’t know what some part of the template was talking about might then be motivated to come to a workshop or seek out other resources.

III. **Improve the assessment method for assignment prompts.** It may have been more useful to rate the assignments’ usefulness in fulfilling course learning outcomes on, for example, a 1–5 scale than with a simple yes or no. Many of my yesses were somewhat optimistic.’ Also, ensure that the entire assignment description is available. Some of the questions answered with “no” or “unclear” don’t necessarily mean that there’s a problem, rather, it depends on what happens in the classroom.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Assignment Checklist for Instructors – DRAFT TEMPLATE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the purpose behind the assignment clear (i.e., why are they doing it? What skill or knowledge are they to demonstrate or gain from doing this?)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the Course Learning Outcomes mentioned in the assignment? Have you considered outcomes for writing, critical thinking, information literacy, and content area of the course when designing the assignment? See outcomes listed below and select from each category (writing, critical thinking, information literacy, content area) those that apply to the given assignment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the rhetorical mode clear? For example: description, narration, analysis, compare and contrast, or argument. Do the directions suggest conflicting modes?</td>
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<td>Are there explicit command words designed to make it easier for students to understand what they're supposed to do? Common command words include:</td>
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analyze, compare, contrast, critically evaluate, define, describe, discuss, evaluate, examine, explain, illustrate, interpret, narrate, outline, state, summarize.

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<th><strong>Do you lay out a scaffolding process</strong> for the students to follow? (i.e., a suggested process they should go through to successfully complete the assignment)</th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Is the type of research</strong> that is expected explained to the student (i.e. primary vs. secondary sources, scholarly articles vs. journalism. Can they use blogs, etc.?)? Do you mention how much research is needed?</th>
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<th><strong>Do you mention the length requirements? Due date(s)?</strong></th>
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<th><strong>What is the rubric/grading criteria for the assignment?</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Are there superfluous directions which inhibit student engagement? Does the tone of the assignment cultivate a positive learning environment?</strong></th>
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General Education Learning outcomes:

- **Writing and Communication Skills** The student will be able to:
  (Select from CCNY OR from AACU rubric):

  - **CCNY research paper rubric**
    - formulate a clear thesis
    - provide coherent, unified and effective organization of a paper
    - develop abundant details and examples that provide evidence in support of sound logic
    - use standard diction, grammar and mechanics of English
  
  - **or AACU Written Communication Rubric**
    - demonstrate an understanding of context and purpose for writing
    - use appropriate content to demonstrate mastery of subject
    - execute genre and disciplinary conventions
    - demonstrate skillful use of sources and evidence
    - use standard diction, grammar and mechanics of English

- **Critical Thinking skills (AACU VALUE rubric)** - The student will be able to:
  - clearly frame an issue or problem and consider it critically
  - select, use, and evaluate information to investigate a claim or point of view
  - analyze his or her and others’ assumptions and evaluate relevance of contexts when presenting a position
  - present a position taking into account its complexities and limits as well as others points of view
  - develop logical conclusions based on evaluation of evidence

- **Information literacy skills** - The student will be able to:
  - demonstrate a clear understanding of information needs and ability to search efficiently
  - effectively evaluate information sources
  - articulate credibility of sources
  - use information ethically

- **Content area specific learning outcomes** - The student will be able to:

  A. World Cultures and Global Issues
  - Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring world cultures or global issues, including, but not limited to, anthropology, communications, cultural studies, economics, ethnic studies, foreign languages (building upon previous language acquisition), geography, history, political science, sociology, and world literature.
  - Analyze culture, globalization, or global cultural diversity, and describe an event or process from more than one point of view.
  - Analyze the historical development of one or more non-U.S. societies.
  - Analyze the significance of one or more major movements that have shaped the world's societies.
  - Analyze and discuss the role that race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexual orientation, belief, or other forms of social differentiation play in world cultures or societies.
• Speak, read, and write a language other than English, and use that language to respond to cultures other than one's own.

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B. U.S. Experience in its Diversity
• Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring the U.S. experience in its diversity, including, but not limited to, anthropology, communications, cultural studies, economics, history, political science, psychology, public affairs, sociology, and U.S. literature.
• Analyze and explain one or more major themes of U.S. history from more than one informed perspective.
• Evaluate how indigenous populations, slavery, or immigration have shaped the development of the United States.
• Explain and evaluate the role of the United States in international relations.
• Identify and differentiate among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government and analyze their influence on the development of U.S. democracy.
• Analyze and discuss common institutions or patterns of life in contemporary U.S. society and how they influence, or are influenced by, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, belief, or other forms of social differentiation.

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C. Creative Expression
• Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring creative expression, including, but not limited to, arts, communications, creative writing, media arts, music, and theater.
• Analyze how arts from diverse cultures of the past serve as a foundation for those of the present, and describe the significance of works of art in the societies that created them.
• Articulate how meaning is created in the arts or communications and how experience is interpreted and conveyed.
• Demonstrate knowledge of the skills involved in the creative process.
• Use appropriate technologies to conduct research and to communicate.

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D. Individual and Society
• Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring the relationship between the individual and society, including, but not limited to, anthropology, communications, cultural studies, history, journalism, philosophy, political science, psychology, public affairs, religion, and sociology.
• Examine how an individual's place in society affects experiences, values, or choices.
• Articulate and assess ethical views and their underlying premises.
• Articulate ethical uses of data and other information resources to respond to problems and questions.
• Identify and engage with local, national, or global trends or ideologies, and analyze their impact on individual or collective decision-making.

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E. Scientific World
• Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring the scientific world, including, but not limited to: computer science, history of science, life and physical sciences, linguistics, logic, mathematics, psychology, statistics, and technology-related studies.
• Demonstrate how tools of science, mathematics, technology, or formal analysis can be used to analyze problems and develop solutions.
• Articulate and evaluate the empirical evidence supporting a scientific or formal theory.
• Articulate and evaluate the impact of technologies and scientific discoveries on the contemporary world, such as issues of personal privacy, security, or ethical responsibilities.
• Understand the scientific principles underlying matters of policy or public concern in which science plays a role.