Excerpt: Interpreting the Past Sophomore Inquiry Research Paper Analysis
SOPHOMORE INQUIRY
ASSESSMENT

TOOLS AND METHODS:

**SINQ END-OF-TERM Survey**

**Purpose:** The SINQ End-of-term Survey asked students to rate their experiences in their SINQ course. Students responded to questions about the course format, faculty pedagogical practices, and mentor contribution to the course. The results provide information to individual faculty about their course and to the program about students’ overall experience in SINQ.

**Method:** During the final three weeks of each term during the 2010-2011 academic year, SINQ students completed the End-of-term survey. This on-line survey was administered during mentor sessions. 3542 students responded to the survey.

An extensive review of both SINQ and Jr.-level courses in each Cluster is underway with faculty workgroups actively engaged in improving the coherence of SINQ and Cluster learning objectives. Each Cluster is to develop an assessment plan which will be coordinated with the UNST Assessment Coordinator and SINQ/Cluster Coordinator. These cluster-specific assessments will provide rich opportunities to assess and improve the quality of each Cluster. Examples of two SINQ/Cluster specific assessments efforts follow.

**Interpreting the Past Research Paper Assessment**

**Purpose:** In 2010-11, the first year of the cluster, we focused on attaining greater cohesion within the new cluster’s Sophomore Inquiry classes. All SINQ instructors were invited to join a working group to develop a strategy for teaching research-based writing, and this group reached a consensus on a shared research paper assignment. All SINQs will now incorporate the following elements into their research papers:

1. Initial steps: how to explore a topic in a preliminary way
2. Library resources: how to identify appropriate books and journal articles; how to evaluate the credibility of sources
3. Draft and revision
4. Final paper: 5-7 pages in length

The Interpreting the Past (ItP) SINQ chose to assess student writing during the 2010-2011 school year. Our purpose in this assessment was to look at a cross-section of student work for a specific assignment—a research paper—in order to determine the degree to which students were able to meet the objectives of a specific type of assignment. We wanted to assess students’ strengths and weaknesses and identify areas where instructors and mentors might concentrate their efforts in terms of writing pedagogy. Furthermore, the analytic rubric allows us to identify instructors who had a particular strength in one area, or who had particularly strong papers overall. Using this information, we can help us gather best practices for writing assignments and writing pedagogy.

To assess the research papers, The ItP SINQ/Cluster coordinator worked with the UNST Writing Coordinator to develop an analytic rubric representing the expectations for student writing in the ItP SINQ. The language and design of the rubric were based on objectives articulated in the guidelines for the Interpreting the Past SINQ and conversations between the Writing Coordinator and the Cluster Coordinator, as well as objectives articulated in several of the assignments for the research paper provided by instructors. The rubric included 5 elements (Thesis and Development of Ideas, Research, Integration of Source material, Organization and Structure, and Control of Syntax, Vocabulary and Mechanics), with each element represented by 4 levels of achievement. During Winter and Spring terms, student papers were collected from 7 ItP courses. A total of 68 student papers were reviewed during UNSTs annual portfolio review day. Each student paper was reviewed by 2 reviewers and given a score (1 through 4) on each of 5 writing elements.

**Global Perspectives Syllabus Analysis and SINQ Pilot Survey**

**Purpose:** In addition to a number of conversations that took place during the 2010-2011 academic year regarding the Global Perspectives SINQ/Cluster, the group decided to develop questions to add to the end of term SINQ course evaluation that would assess how well the course covered themes that are central to the learning expectations in the SINQ course. The initial questions were designed to address the course content, the students’ reasons for taking the course, and the students’ plans to pursue academic activities related to the Global Perspectives SINQ course. A syllabus review was also conducted to identify common elements across Global Perspectives SINQ courses.

**Method:** During summer 2011, one section of Global Perspectives SINQ was offered. The students enrolled in that course were asked a series of questions related to the goals of the SINQ as a part of their end-of-term course evaluation. Twenty-six students completed the on-line end-of-term survey. Syllabi from 11 instructors representing all five regions were reviewed.
SOPHOMORE INQUIRY
ASSESSMENT

INTERPRETING THE PAST RESEARCH PAPER ASSESSMENT

NUMBER OF PORTFOLIOS SURVEYED = 68

Papers scored on a 1-4 scale in each area

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<th>THESIS</th>
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<td>60.3</td>
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% OF PAPERS AT EACH SCORE LEVEL

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KEY

Papers scored on a 1-4 scale in each area

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the categories with the highest mean scores were Organization (2.52) and Syntax (2.77). 82% of student papers were scored above a 2 (on a 4-point scale) for Syntax and 68% were scored above a 2 on Organization. The mean student score for Integration was the lowest of the 5 categories (2.31). Only half of the student papers were scored above 2 in the Integration category.
SINQ End-of-Term Survey

Student ratings of the learning experience in Sophomore Inquiry show an increase from previous years in the areas of critical thinking, working with others as a team, writing, and exploring ethical issues. Student feedback on the connection of mentor sessions to main session also has shown improvement. Continued improvement in these areas may be a result of the feedback loop from the assessment team to faculty.

Student ratings of faculty also showed a significant increase from the previous year in the areas of showing a personal interest, scheduling work and assignments, using a variety of methods to evaluate progress, clearly stating learning objectives, and creating an atmosphere to encourage students to engage and participate. Ratings of faculty will continue to be used to provide developmental feedback to faculty, particularly those hired specifically to teach in UNST courses. Course evaluations are also included by faculty in their portfolio reviews for annual review or tenure.

While assessment scores are high overall, variation in the scores do provide a focus for continued faculty and course development in the next year. Notable in this regard is the lack of demonstrable improvement in SINQ courses providing opportunities to explore issues of diversity. This represents an opportunity for both general faculty development and specific assessment of how diversity is included in each Cluster.

An extensive review of both SINQ and Jr.-level courses in each Cluster is underway with faculty workgroups actively engaged in improving the coherence of SINQ and Cluster learning objectives. As the review is sequential and is leading to a reduced number of Clusters over several years, it may be useful to include analysis of the data by Cluster to compare and contrast areas of strengths and needed improvements by Cluster. Each Cluster is to develop an assessment plan which will be coordinated with the UNST Assessment Coordinator and SINQ/Cluster Coordinator. These cluster-specific assessments will provide rich opportunities to assess and improve the quality of each Cluster.

Interpreting the Past
Research Paper Assessment

This assessment process has proved useful in a number of ways, and it has provided information about both writing instruction and the assessment process itself. Through looking at student work developed in response to similar (though not identical) assignments, we were able to identify areas where SINQ students might experience particular difficulty in writing a college-level research paper. Based on the scores, students struggled most with the following elements of writing: developing a thesis throughout the paper; working with and researching appropriate sources; and integrating sources into their papers. In regard to thesis development, the scorers that participated in the assessment identified several cases where a student had a clear thesis statement, but did not go on to develop a coherent analysis throughout. In other words, several students focused on the statement itself, but they did not develop a strong, consistent relationship between their thesis statement and ideas throughout the paper. The scorers also identified cases where there was strong, in-depth analysis in the paper, but the student did not pull their ideas together to form a coherent thesis statement or analysis.

Identifying these areas provides a platform to begin to recognize strategies and best practices for addressing the areas where students might need further instruction and clarification. For example, if papers demonstrate that a number of students lacked appropriate and credible sources, how might we begin to guide students towards stronger assessment of their own sources and increase their understanding of the purpose of academic research in this context? Furthermore, if one instructor’s students had particularly high scores in one area relative to other classes, this assessment allows us to explore course activities that may have helped students develop this ability.

Writing rubric

Much of the conversation that followed the scoring focused on the rubric itself and the particulars of the language in the rubric. Overall, reaction to the rubric was positive, especially given that this is the first time we have used it, and scorers enjoyed the opportunity to look closely at one piece of student work. Though most members of the group indicated that they found the rubric helpful and easy to use—and the general level of agreement among scores indicates that scorers were able to apply the rubric after group calibration—scorers did find some of the terms used in the rubric confusing or inconsistent. For example, some scorers found the interchangeable use of the terms “some” and “minimal” to be inaccurate, since “some” generally implies more than “minimal.” Some scorers also indicated that on some papers they had difficulty providing scores for “Organization and Structure” since they came across papers where a student’s paragraphs were well organized, but the paper lacked coherence overall. In terms of writing instruction, this indicates that, in some cases, students may be able to develop focused paragraphs, but they may need more guidance when developing coherence in longer papers that call for a sustained development of an idea.

Scorers also debated some of the descriptions of specific elements in the rubric. Some questioned whether or not students’ ability to recognize various interpretations of an issue or topic was better aligned with integration of source materials rather than thesis development. Also, some scorers indicated that they had some difficulty differentiating between research and integration of sources.
There was also discussion surrounding differences in expectations for writing and research in different disciplines. For example, one scorer indicated that the rubric might provide a clearer definition of what a thesis means in this context, given that the definition of a thesis varies. Since SINQs are interdisciplinary courses that introduce students to a variety of conventions and approaches across disciplines, this scorers’ observation indicates that instructors and students could benefit from either a definition or clear examples of expectations within the disciplines they draw from.

**Assessment Process**

Our experience allowed us to garner some insight that might be helpful for future assessment projects of this kind. For this project, we only had access to some of the research paper assignments students received and, therefore, did not provide scorers with the assignments. Though we did not want scorers to assess the work relative to what students were asked to do, the written assignments could have provided important context that may have helped scorers better understand the student work.

In the future, it would also be beneficial to have instructors that teach the particular SINQ participate in both the development of the rubric and the scoring itself. Given the timing of the assessment, we were unable to plan sufficiently for optimal participation and collaboration. However, as other SINQs revisit their course objectives, they should consider these issues as they develop their rubrics and their assessment plan.

**Interpreting the Past Plans for 2011-12**

Fall 2011 will see the initial implementation of the shared research paper components, and we will track this process through continuing to assess the Communication goal for this academic year. At the initial faculty meeting for Interpreting the Past SINQ instructors, we will have a presentation by the UNST Writing Coordinator, Anne Knepler, on tactics for teaching integration (the lowest scoring aspect in the spring 2011 assessment). Based on this next round of assessment, we will fine-tune the shared research paper then for 2012-13.

We are also going to begin an annual on-line journal highlighting the student research writing from the SINQs, which will in turn then offer students a ready collection of varied exemplars for use in subsequent years. The other way that we will enhance resources for teaching research, writing and critical thinking skills is by developing with Anne Knepler an online suite of resources specific to our SINQ research paper.

**Global Perspectives Syllabus Analysis and SINQ Pilot Survey**

During the 2010-2011 academic year, we piloted a number of assessment efforts related to the Global Perspectives SINQs, including an evaluation of a Summer quarter SINQ (Introduction to Europe.) Originally we planned to include a second SINQ (Introduction to Latin America) but that course was cancelled. In absence of more data, we will wait until the end of Fall 2011 to make more comments. We will continue surveying throughout 2011-12 (for questions/comments, see below). Additional questions may be added after fall quarter. In addition, we collected and analyzed syllabi from the 5 regional courses (11 syllabi, see above for details). Further assessment efforts included adding language surrounding learning objectives and meeting with all new instructors of global perspectives SINQ.

**Global Perspectives plans for 2011-12**

Initial 2011-12 assessment efforts for the cluster will include:

1. Evaluation Questions end of quarter as part of UNST evaluations
2. Map Exercise in all SINQs
3. Continued Collection of Syllabi on annual basis and review periodically
4. Language included regarding the overarching global perspectives focus into SINQ syllabi
5. Interviews with selected instructors on content-related issues to determine effective assessment measures for the future