

Self-Study

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1. Response to Recommendations of Previous Review

Last Cycle's Response: The only recommendation in my previous review concerned time taken to return student work. This is an area I have long struggled with, experimenting over my years of teaching with various feedback mechanisms in order to accommodate both, on the one hand, students' need for timely grades and response to their work and, on the other hand, their need for thoughtfully and carefully formulated grading and feedback that informs them not only of areas that need improvement but of their strengths and progress. As every committed instructor knows, this is an emotionally and intellectually demanding – as well as simply a very time-consuming – process, perhaps even more when we work with students whose confidence in their own ability to write and generally to perform at the college level is not high. I have jettisoned the more efficient but less personal “forms” that I used for a certain time, rubrics with areas for check marks in appropriate boxes indicating relative strength of a given area of a given assignment accompanied by space for commentary. Indeed, I have queried students over the years about their preferences in receiving graded work, and their responses have made me understand that most students feel most supported and encouraged when their instructors give them written commentary with specific points of praise and specific areas to work on in their writing. Formulating that feedback in a way that students will be able to learn from and will appreciate takes time, as it requires attentiveness to each student's individual areas of improvement and specific sensibilities. (For example, I have cultivated the habit of asking all students, when they submit formal written work that will be graded, to indicate to me how they want their writing “marked”; they know what I am asking, as we have developed a shared vocabulary about feedback based on our in-class viewing of the extremely useful short film *Writing across Borders*.) I know for certain that I have made progress in the area of returning student work in a more timely fashion without sacrificing – and even augmenting – the individuated character of my feedback, as I have kept track of the average amount of time it has taken me to return formal writing assignments over the past several years and also of the types of feedback students give me when I ask them to reflect on their graded work (and on my responses to their graded work). Still, I aim to improve my average turn-around time even further, to which end I have regular conversations with colleagues about marking and grading best practices, as well as continuing to solicit feedback from my students about what best helps them learn to strengthen their reading and writing.

This Cycle's Response: This is an area I have definitely made progress in most semesters since my last review cycle. This semester, my workload has been higher than ever before, and getting sick over all of our Spring Break dashed my plans to get completely caught up in grading and marking student work to return. I put in a perhaps inordinate amount of time preparing feedback on pre-final drafts of formal writing assignments, which I know helps students immensely, but which also sometimes impacts my workload in ways that make it difficult for me to return final drafts of assignments as quickly as I'd like. (Again, some semesters I've reached my turn-around-time goals; this semester, I have been more behind in one of my classes than I'd have liked.)

I plan to work this summer on ways to streamline my student-response time so that next Fall, I will have more structures in place to ensure that I am always able to return final drafts of student work more promptly than I sometimes have this semester – even when emergencies arise or my workload increases in ways I hadn’t anticipated. I also plan to organize at least one workshop for part-time faculty on managing one’s workload, especially for instructors who require written work of their students. It is a regular discussion topic in shared work areas among faculty that we sometimes feel we’re “drowning in student papers” – so it’s clear to me that many of us could benefit from some collaborative conversation in which we share tools we’ve developed to help us in this area of our work. This will be a form of professional development I want to make available to part-time faculty in particular, something I don’t recall ever seeing offered at CRC in my years of teaching here.

II. Remedy Cycle History

My primary assignments continue to be English Writing 300: College Composition, though I have also taught ENG WR 101, ENG WR 301, and ENG WR 302.

The year before my previous performance review, I adopted for my English 300 courses the second edition of Keith Hjortshoj’s *Transition to College Writing* and Lauren Weber’s *In Cheap We Trust: The Story of a Misunderstood American Virtue*. Since then, I have also begun requiring Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s brief edition of *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. I am pleased with my current set of course materials for several reasons:

- Hjortshoj’s book is a truly affordable and wonderfully useful introduction to some key differences between high school and college, including the various uses of spoken and written language that college students will likely be expected to understand and to perform. Hjortshoj also reassures students that many of the sources of anxiety and confusion they are likely to have experienced in relation to academic writing are perfectly understandable and surmountable;
- Weber’s book offers ample opportunity for students to experience expository writing aimed at a generally educated, literate, and curious adult readership, and models rich variations in sentence, paragraph, and whole chapter structure and organization, as well as offering a truly luxurious vocabulary, all while delving into the relevance of American history in understanding current attitudes and practices toward spending and saving money;
- Graff and Birkenstein’s book gives students directly usable models and templates they can use and modify to help them perform the rhetorical moves of academic writing that many of them struggle with, including positioning oneself in relation to others on a particular topic and maintaining an appropriate tone while not sacrificing one’s own “voice” in writing, which tends to help students feel more engaged and connected to academic writing;
- Students have many opportunities to conduct guided research as they investigate what they read (and see, in supplementary course materials) according to their own interests related to our course themes.

I regularly encourage students to use the researching and critical thinking skills they are strengthening through their reading and writing assignments both in their other academic courses and in their everyday lives.

For English 101 and English 302, I continue to experiment with course materials that I think will best meet the needs of our diverse student population, while aiming to keep costs low. This semester, I used Ramage, Bean, and Johnson's *Writing Arguments* for English Writing 302 (Advanced Composition and Critical Thinking) – the next-to-most-current edition so that students would be sure to be able to purchase used copies of this fine text. Next semester, for English 101 (College Writing), I will be using the full edition of Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, based on my own experiences with the brief version of this text in English 300 classes and also based on conversations with multiple colleagues inside and outside of Los Rios who have used this text successfully in developmental writing courses.

III. Efforts Taken to Stay Current

I participate in as many professional development activities as I can and, as I tell students when we work with Los Rios library databases, I use my access to hundreds of thousands of scholarly articles to keep myself apprised of trends in the teaching of composition and English at the post-secondary level. I also have regular conversations with colleagues about pedagogy, learning from and with both fellow instructors in English and instructors in a variety of other disciplines and academic areas. (This is one benefit of sharing office space with colleagues, particularly at the Elk Grove Center, where I have been teaching almost exclusively since the Center opened: instructors across the disciplines have regular conversations about teaching, which I find enriches my professional life.)

IV. Future Directions

One of the benefits of becoming involved in our faculty union (locally and state-wide) is learning more about the teaching and learning conditions in our district and throughout our California Community College system. I plan to continue to do this work in order to help part-time faculty in particular have a voice in their workplaces and to feel empowered to ask for the information, professional development, and other opportunities they want and need within Los Rios. (A healthy group of faculty, administrators, and classified staff began some very valuable work at CRC this semester identifying ways that the college can more effectively plan and promote professional development activities, with various constituencies represented; I have a particular interest in how these processes can better serve part-time faculty who want more opportunities to engage in professional development throughout the academic year.)

As indicated above, I also intend to work this summer and next fall not just individually but in collaboration with others on ways to ensure that every semester, I meet my goals for turnaround time for students' formal writing assignments. I also intend to continue working on bringing part-timers together to work collaboratively on various aspects of our pedagogy, including classroom community building and the use of work groups in writing classes.

V. Other

VI. Attachments

I attach with this document copies of the syllabi for the two distinct courses I am teaching this semester: ENG 300 (2 sections) and ENG 302 (1 section).

