Becoming the Learner: Collaborative Inquiry, Reflection, and Writing- Program Assessment

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> In order to be regarded as intellectual work [. . .] writing administration must be viewed as a form of inquiry which advances knowledge and which has formalized outcomes that are subject to peer review and disciplinary evaluation.
>
> —*Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration*
> Council of Writing Program Administrators

In an effort to articulate the work of writing program administrators, the WPA Executive Committee drafted a position statement, "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration," following its meetings of 1998. Easily accessed from the new WPA Web site, the position statement serves as a resource for scholars and researchers as they continue developing the discipline of writing administration. The information and guidelines contained within the position statement demonstrate how the complexities involved in WPA work move it beyond "management" to place it squarely in the realm of scholarship.

Section 5 of this position statement, called "Evaluative Criteria," offers four guidelines for assessing the work of writing programs:

- Basing writing administration work on the five categories of "administrative work": Program Creation, Curricular Design, Faculty Development, Program Assessment and Evaluation, and Program-Related Textual Production

- Clarifying the types of activities considered as "intellectual"
- Judging the quality of work through the categories of Innovation, Improvement/Refinement, Dissemination, and Empirical Results
- Accepting peer evaluation and review as viable means of assessment.

Taken either individually or as a whole, these guidelines provide a strong foundation for undertaking an assessment of either a WPA or a writing program.[1] They not only establish a means for assessment but also for growth and development.

Based on these four guidelines, we are suggesting a heuristic procedure for assessing WPA work that we call "Becoming the Learner." Although this article details a portfolio assessment project, we are not arguing for a particular approach to assessing portfolios; rather, we aim to demonstrate how writing programs can assess themselves by taking on the role of a student engaged in collaborative inquiry and reflection.

Becoming the Learner

Jim Corder in "What I Learned at School" confesses to a composition-classroom fantasy that many have shared: he admits to those presemester visions of actually writing every essay alongside his first-year composition students, hoping to create a reciprocal writing community. He writes: "In an excess of zeal during the first meeting of my freshman composition class, I vowed that I would write an essay every time they did and that I would turn my essays over to them as they turned theirs in to me" (330). For Corder, learning is mutual. As such, effective writing classes should be collaborative learning environments where both teachers and students are open to new discoveries. His notion of teachers completing every writing assignment with students is an effective, if somewhat idealistic, means through which to create such collaboration.

Unfortunately, at least for those of us with busy schedules and complicated lives, such noble visions never quite reach fruition. Such "temporary friskiness" or "coltish vigor" (Corder "What" 163), usually fades away by week two or three, leaving us at the front of the class, never really sitting on the other side of the desk. As Corder's essay suggests—in his typically pensive way—teachers would do well to take on the learner's role. Becoming a learner provides a different lens through which to analyze our teaching goals, practices, and outcomes, benefiting not only teachers but also administrators. Becoming like our students and experiencing what they do gives us a new way to perform assessment. By stepping out of our usual roles and

taking on the role of the learner, we can broaden our invention strategies beyond those we would normally use. We can enact our program's curriculum, a process that calls for a more cyclic, collaborative approach to invention.

Of course, a precondition to taking on the role of the learner is altering our understanding of invention. Corder points out the fallacy of limiting invention to early stages of the writing process. For Corder, invention is always

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open, and writers must resist the urge to come to closure too early. Corder finds fault with insisting on a sequential location for invention. Rather than always locating invention before drafting, Corder believes "invention always occurs" ("Argument" 17). In *Uses of Rhetoric*, Corder laments the lack of access to creativity that accompanies a limited notion of invention. He observes a society and method of composition instruction that is committed to expediency, where "necessity is the mother of invention" (*Uses* 47). To overcome limitations created by a one-dimensional, that is, linear, writing process (i.e., invention, arrangement, style), Corder suggests we incorporate new methods of invention into our practices.

Corder further develops the notion of open invention by expanding the contemporary conception of ethos in "Varieties of Ethical Argument, with Some Account of the Significance of *Ethos* in the Teaching of Composition." For Corder, ethos is not the simple monistic category of credibility common today but an expansive realm including multiple ethoi: he suggests five types—dramatic, gratifying, functional, efficient, and generative ("Varieties" 14). The final category, generative ethos, is the one we wish to focus on here. It involves a writer's interest in seeing him- or herself anew in order to regenerate identity and understanding. It involves a writer's awareness of connecting to and sharing space with others (Corder "Varieties" 14). In terms of writing program administration, we see generative ethos as an attitude where WPAs enter into their work (and especially their assessment) with a sense of continually inventing themselves anew—entering into a space as learners.

A recent examination of generative ethos in writing program administration can be found in Rita Malenczyk's 2002 "Administration as Emergence." Here she calls upon Corder's idea of generative ethos to investigate the many daily complexities of writing program administration. She recognizes that a successful administrator must "step away from one's own position and (at

least in part) into someone else's shoes" (81), consistently generating him- or herself anew. By making use of generative ethos, then, administrators can not only cope with contentions as they arise but also develop a more sound rhetorical approach to administrative work. We agree with Malenczyk's assertion that administrators should put themselves into someone else's shoes, and here we examine what happens when those shoes belong to our students.

In the following pages, we take on this reversed role and draw directly from the first-year composition curriculum at our institution, the University of Arizona. We examine assignments from our first- and second-semester courses, English 101 and English 102, and demonstrate the ways in which a Corderian role-reversal provides an excellent opportunity for reflection, which, as Popham et al. explain in "Breaking Hierarchies," can help "develop stronger writing programs" (28). For us, such reflection became especially relevant in light of a large-scale assessment project in which we participated during the academic year 2003–04. As a result of our reflection, we envision writing program assessment as a process of collaborative inquiry that enriches the experiences of everyone involved.

Putting our Program in Context

The University of Arizona Writing Program enrolls more than five thousand students a year and employs four writing specialists, ten TEADs (teaching advisors), approximately 150 GATs (graduate assistants/associates in teaching), one faculty member (the director, then Dr. Thomas P. Miller and now Dr. Anne-Marie Hall), and several adjunct instructors. Course offerings include nine first-year composition options as well as sophomore composition, advanced composition, business writing, technical writing, and advanced professional writing. It also maintains a comprehensive Web site located at <http://writprog.web.arizona.edu/>.

To acquaint new instructors with the writing program's curriculum, the program offers a year-long preceptorship, which "includes a seven-day orientation in August, a two-day orientation in January, weekly meetings [. . .] throughout the year, and Spring Conference [. . .]. In addition, UA's writing program provides on-going training and supervision for GATs during all of the years they teach composition" (University of Arizona, *Preceptorship*).

The writing program is also involved in several WAC initiatives, including running a writing center, participating in midcareer assessment review, and working with general education writing workshops. These initiatives are discussed in more detail on the writing program Web site. The writing program also houses the Southern Arizona Writing Project (SAWP) and plays

host to other high school outreach programs, such as senior writing portfolios and essay contests. More information about these outreach activities can be found at <http://sawp.web.arizona.edu/>.

Currently, several institutional and intellectual challenges confront the writing program. As with other state universities, the University of Arizona faces recurring budget cuts. To address these cuts, U of A's former president Peter Likins has put forth an initiative called "Focused Excellence." This plan reconstructs departments and programs based on the university's mission to be a leader in specialized research. As a result the writing program has tried to define and articulate more carefully its mission for presentation to the university administration. In addition, the university is also pursuing programs that promote learner-centered education as that idea has been articulated by the Arizona Board of Regents (*Learner-Centered*).

Opportunity for Reflection and Collaboration: A Tri-university Grant

In December 2002, directors from the writing programs at Arizona State University (ASU), Northern Arizona University (NAU), and the University of Arizona (UA) proposed a research study to our shared governing body, the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR). This proposed study[2] was intended to "develop tri-university goals for English composition, develop [a] common rubric for shared goals [. . . and assess] learning outcomes [. . .] based on quantitative and qualitative measures" (*Learner-Centered*). Achieving these goals would involve collecting hundreds of portfolios from each university's required first-year composition courses and organizing a large-scale, collaborative reading to analyze their contents.

The proposal sought to initiate a long term and continuing statewide interuniversity collaboration in the hopes of articulating common outcomes assessment measures. As the proposal explained, "What our writing programs do not have, as yet, is program-wide outcomes assessment that has been articulated among the three universities" (*Tri-University*). While each university provided assessment of students, instructors, and its writing program, no structured means for reflection and articulation existed among the three universities. In addition, the writing program directors hoped to develop active working relationships among themselves as well as to promote reflective praxis among the instructors on each campus. The project aimed to "initiate a continuing dialogue between teaching members of the three universities and program administrators, focusing on the commonality of goals and their assessments" (*Tri-University*).

Communication began with several face-to-face meetings and numerous e-mail exchanges between the directors and a hired consultant, Dr. Edward White. These brainstorming sessions generated a plan for the large-scale collection, reading, and analysis of the portfolios. Taking care of the first order of business, the three directors and Dr. White generated a list of assessment criteria valued on all three campuses: development, evidence of learning, mechanics and grammar, organization, and reflection. After these initial exchanges, much of the grant activity shifted to individual campuses.

The entire portfolio process was to take place over eleven months. The first collaborative reading was planned for ASU in June 2003, the second for NAU in October 2003, and the final reading for UA in May 2004. The first step on each campus was selecting "table leaders," experienced instructors in their respective writing programs. Table leaders were responsible for creating and revising the rubrics as well as selecting portfolios to be used as anchors for reader norming. For each reading, instructors from all three campuses participated in the two-day process, helping promote the collegiality proposed in the grant. Readers were primarily first-year and experienced GATs, adjuncts, and other faculty of writing-intensive courses. Readers were trained to assess the portfolios holistically, a process defined by Elliot, Plata, and Zelhart below:

> To view a sample of writing holistically is to attempt to view the writing as more than the mere sum of its elementary parts. In considering a sample of writing from a holistic perspective, readers do not judge separately the singular factors—treatment of topic, selection of rhetorical methods, word choice, grammar and mechanics—that constitute a piece of writing. Rather, raters are asked to consider these factors as elements that work together to make a total impression on the reader. It is this total impression that is sought in holistic scoring. (17)

At the end of the assessment, a debriefing occurred, allowing readers to reflect about what they learned from the process. These generative conversations discussed similarities and differences in student writing, curriculum, and teaching practices across campuses.

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These debriefing sessions highlight the collaboration that went on throughout this process. Tables consisted of readers from all three universities, and these readers learned about each others' writing programs and pedagogies. Out of these debriefings came comments such as Ellen Johnson's. She is an ASU teaching assistant who gleaned valuable ideas from her experience as a reader at NAU. In the final report of the statewide evaluation, she speculates about ways to bring ideas from NAU's program to the ASU campus:

> I liked the NAU Writer's Portfolio schematics. Adopting a sound measurement tool such as this, making it a requirement at the end of the semester for all students, would allow for a better assessment of student progress at ASU. While having a diverse talent pool of instructors and teaching practices is an inviolate tenet of any vigorous writing program, asking teachers to use a standardized procedure for assessing student writing once per semester is a reasonable request. (*Evaluating Learner-Centered*)

Further collaboration is evident in reflections from Mohammed Albakry, a teaching assistant at NAU, who, as a result of his experience, sees the NAU writing program through new eyes:

> Those who are not from NAU or are not GAs have also expressed their favorable impression of our comp program. [. . .] Technological literacy for example was something they noticed was emphasized in all the classes and most students seem to have liked that emphasis. They also liked the structure and the progression of essays we have [at NAU] and the way these essays feed into each other. (*Evaluating Learner-Centered*)

NAU teacher, Kendra Birnley, commented on what an ASU counterpart had to say about the NAU program and teaching in general:

> Our ASU reader, who teaches ESL, realized the importance of teaching discursive structure to her students. Another reader noted how important it is not to bog students down with too

many rules in portfolio assignment sheets. She felt that the students who seemed to be writing a rigidly structured portfolio performed with less competence than the students who seemed to have more free-reign [sic]. All of us agreed that it was reassuring to see that the "bad" portfolios exist in every class and that we don't necessarily have to feel incompetent as teachers if a few of our students do not perform well. A few readers felt that they were going to emphasize clarity and style/mechanics more now after seeing some of the careless mistakes that students can make, even in "polished" portfolios. (*Evaluating Learner-Centered*)

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that as a result of such collaborations, "a number of teachers—from all three universities—continue to talk and e-mail each other about ideas, even after the project has concluded. Others are moving from one program to another. For example, GA Chris Vassett [. . .] has now completed her MA at NAU and started her PhD work at ASU this fall" (*Evaluating Learner-Centered*). Projects such as large-scale portfolio assessments and other statewide meetings are excellent opportunities for collaboration. Such collaboration between university faculties can provide an invaluable resource for assessing the work of writing programs. In this particular project, readers learned about other programs and curricula and could discuss their experiences. In addition, administrators listened to these conversations about their programs' goals, objectives, and performance. Such discussions demonstrate how those involved became community collaborators by reflecting on their assessment practices.

Looking back on this year-long portfolio assessment project, we discovered that our process of brainstorming, collaboration, assessment, and reflection mirrored what we ask of first-year composition (FYC) students. We realized that if we reversed our roles—in Corderian fashion, by looking at ourselves as students and not as administrators—assessment could become a collaborative inquiry process. That is, in the first instance the journey was a collaboration among students, teachers, writing specialists, teaching advisors, assessment specialists, and administrators who were inquiring into an entire curriculum. We knew that in order to make our embarkation and journey successful, assessment had to be a dynamic, rhetorical process that considered all viewpoints, consistently reflected on them, and continually generated new ways of dealing with situations. Below we will elaborate on the specific connections we found between our assessment experiences and students' FYC experiences to gain insight into new possibilities for assessment practices.

English 101—Finding Meaning

Here at the University of Arizona, more than five thousand first-year students purchase *A Student's Guide to First-Year Composition*, our custom-published handbook currently in its twenty-seventh edition. The *Student's Guide* introduces students to the coming year of writing classes.[3] It includes information about the course goals (Table 1), required sequence of papers, and the writing skills and strategies needed to complete these assignments successfully.

Table 1.

English 101: Course Goals

- Analyze complex texts through close reading.
- Develop strategies for analyzing texts for particular purposes, audiences, and situations.
- Analyze how authors use textual conventions to achieve their purposes in specific contexts.
- Write essays that develop your analyses with evidence drawn from the texts you read.
- Incorporate other writers' interpretations into your analyses.
- Learn research, reading, writing, and revision strategies that you can apply to your work in other courses and your profession.
- Create multiple, meaningful revisions of your own writing. (*Student's Guide* 17)

On the first day of English 101, students meet an instructor trained through preceptorship to be sensitive to the course goals. This instructor is typically a GAT from one of five graduate programs: Creative Writing; English Language/Linguistics; Literature; Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English; and Second Language Acquisition and Teaching. Such an array of instructors provides diverse pedagogical perspectives and experiences.

Students then learn of five major assignments. This sequence represents a process-oriented approach that consists of both informal and formal writing. Through the assignments, students learn how the meaning of different texts can be understood through different analytical methods. Below we briefly describe each assignment and then explain how each assignment helped us perform our role-reversal and reflection. We hope to show that becoming a learner promotes assessment as collaborative inquiry. By becoming like our

students—not necessarily writing each essay along with them (as Corder suggested thirty years earlier) but by enacting the same curriculum—we found a new way to understand writing program assessment.

Writer's Journal. Like most journals, use of a writer's journal intends to keep students writing throughout the semester and provides a medium for reflection. It asks students to "focus on [their] responses to what [they] read, see, write, and hear over the entire semester, in and out of class" (*Student's Guide* 21). Student journals are collected either periodically throughout the semester or once at the end.

Because it provides writers the opportunity to record, review, and reflect about experiences and ideas, a journal can be an excellent tool for administrators too. Journaling helps keep invention open and enables a writer of any type to generate new ideas consistently. Unfortunately, as administrative responsibilities mounted, we writing program administrators neglected our journals, preventing us from getting the most benefit from this project. For example, before the first reading at ASU, we could have referred to our journals to help brainstorm specific goals for using the scores that would eventually be generated on our campus while we observed and collaborated with those at ASU. Having these goals could have led to more focused and productive interactions. Instead, we missed an opportunity. We didn't develop ideas to identify ways the portfolio scores could be used meaningfully on our campus until several weeks prior to the collaborative reading. In addition, had we kept more detailed journals during the initial stages of the assessment project, we might have made better note of the connections among "Focused Excellence," ABOR's call for projects investigating student-centered learning practices, and research on openness and invention. Only in the process of writing this article when we took on the student's role and began using our curriculum as a means of assessment, did we learn the important opportunities we missed.

Analysis Essay. The analysis essay is the first essay written during the first semester. It asks students to "focus closely on the text itself" and "analyze [. . .] the literary and textual features that create meaning [. . .]" (*Student's Guide* 20). Students select either a visual or a written text and demonstrate their understanding that meaning can be discovered through close reading.

For our assessment project, textual analysis meant reanalyzing the texts that articulate our program goals. We revisited the *WPA Outcomes Statement*[4] and the course goals for English 101 and 102 (which we discuss below). Revisiting these texts allowed us to create a scoring rubric that best represented the goals of our program: reflection, evidence of learning, development, organization, and mechanics and grammar (see Appendix A). We also developed specific descriptors for each of these headings based on course

goals articulated in the *Student's Guide*. Ultimately, the rubric went through three iterations that, although similar, reflected the particularities of each program. Therefore, just as students used textual analysis to create a statement about meaning in the text, we, too, used textual analysis to create a rubric that would assign meaning to student writing.

We also relied on textual analysis during the table-leader norming. Table leaders assume an important task during the assessment process—they are responsible for maintaining consistent scores across a table of readers.[5] First, however, they select model papers that are used to train the readers on how to score. Several weeks prior to the portfolio reading, anchors (portfolios representing a range of scores) were tested by the table leaders who needed to reach consensus on their scores. During the table leader norming process, table leaders carefully examined each anchor to confirm that the assigned score was accurate—a sometimes contentious collaboration! This process required table leaders to rely on close reading strategies much like the ones students use in their essays.

Whereas textual analysis can be seen as a skill only needed by FYC students, our reflections on the portfolio project made us aware of its potential importance in program assessment. We realized we had made use of close reading in the rubric formation and in the norming processes. Taken as a generative tool, textual analysis can be invaluable to learners of all levels.

Text-in-Context Essay. The second essay of the first semester asks students to broaden their views by considering elements beyond the text. Students are encouraged to "focus on a text and its relationship to a larger context, such as the author's biography, the historical or cultural situation surrounding the text, a particular theoretical approach

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such as feminism or psychoanalysis, or the literary tradition to which the work belongs" (*Student's Guide* 20). In completing this assignment, students often discover for the first time how contextual influences can shape a text's meaning.

For our project, contextual analysis meant looking at the history and future of our writing program as the context surrounding the "text" of the portfolio reading. Several campus-wide conversations were significant; however, the exigency created by "Focused Excellence" took precedence. In the *Arizona Daily Star*, then-President Likins explained, "The strategy of focus will necessarily mean the merging, restructuring and possible elimination of some programs" (B–14). To avoid possible elimination, programs and departments across campus felt the need to clarify their missions and pur-

poses to the administration. For example, at a College of Humanities meeting soon after the publication of Likins' editorial, departments presented their arguments about ways they had satisfied the president's proposal to reach academic "excellence." Obviously, such claims require supporting data. By carefully documenting our findings from the portfolio assessment, we tried to present a convincing case to the upper echelons of administration should our program ever be threatened with elimination or serious cuts.

As a result of the assessment project, we now retain copies of 956 assessed portfolios demonstrating student achievement. Based on criteria from our rubric, each of these portfolios has a composite score on a scale of "1" to "5" with "1" being the lowest. For example, a portfolio with a composite score of "2" means that both times it was assessed; the raters agreed it deserved a "1." Similarly, for a score of "10," both raters agreed it deserved a "5." Of the 956 portfolios, 448—roughly half—received composite scores in the upper half (defined as a "7" or above) of the rubric. Such data could help us demonstrate excellence in learning as Likins had defined it in the same editorial: "focused excellence means having programs of consistently high academic distinction" (B–14). With approximately half of the students assessed as scoring in the upper portion of a collaboratively developed rubric, we could then confidently claim that our writing program demonstrated excellence in learning. In addition, this tri-university collaboration focusing on an investigation of pedagogical practices speaks to a different kind of excellence— innovation in research methods.

By doing what we ask of our students (that is, look at a text-in-context), we could see how our assessment project is intimately connected to the past and future. Taking on the learner's role, participating in inquiry and collaboration, allowed our assessment to grow out of the surrounding contextual situation. Understanding the specific context of our institution made our assessment different from the other two universities.

Cultural Analysis Essay. For the third essay of the semester, students shift their thinking inward to their personal beliefs. They are asked to "focus on a text and the way [they] interpret it based on [their] particular cultural perspective[s]" (*Student's Guide* 20). In this unit, students discover ways that their own backgrounds and experiences shape their interpretation of a text. They are then challenged to consider how their beliefs have been further shaped by various ideological influences.

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Just as FYC students examine how personal and ideological beliefs influence their analyses, during reader norming we questioned how our readers' differing perspectives, backgrounds, and personal beliefs might influence their assessments. For example, we often heard readers debate issues they found pervasive in writing. Some questioned how to assess ESL issues using our rubric. Some questioned how to assess voice. Others argued that substance should outweigh fluency. What we found was a mingling of perspectives, each illuminating different desires and priorities. Our challenge was to acknowledge diversity among our norming participants and simultaneously build a shared understanding of successful student writing. In reflecting on the portfolio assessment experience, we realized that not only did this lens of cultural analysis enable us to listen to the many different voices of our GATs, instructors, and students, but it also helped all involved examine professional beliefs. For example, as we thought about the different voices and cultural perspectives voiced during the reader norming, we realized that our rubric was flexible enough to account for them all. Since the rubric represented our program's outcome goals, our awareness allowed us to feel more confident about our program's mission.

By taking on the role of the learner and enacting our own curriculum during this self-assessment, we renewed our confidence in course goals. Through cultural analysis, we realized that one of our program's strengths is its ability to be open to multiple perspectives. Its outcomes statements are flexible enough to allow one instructor to emphasize voice, for instance, and another to emphasize content; simultaneously, they are unified enough to provide a cohesive curriculum. We also learned that as campus demographics change, we will be obliged to reshape our program to ensure it continues its collaborative nature. The interests of current students, instructors, and administrators will not necessarily be the interests of those in the future, so our program must ensure that it constantly listens to new perspectives as they are voiced. Implementing opportunities for collaboration such as this portfolio assessment project is one way to ensure such listening occurs.

English 102—Writing to Persuade

 The second semester of FYC, English 102, focuses on further development of students' skills in analysis and composition. In addition to having a significant research component, the course heavily emphasizes rhetorical analysis and persuasive writing (see Table 2).

Table 2.

English102: Course Goals

- Read texts to assess how writers achieve their purposes with their intended audiences.
- Devise composing strategies suited to various rhetorical situations.
- Develop a persuasive argument and support it with evidence and effective appeals that target your intended audience.
- Locate and analyze evidence to develop an argument and integrate it into your own text.
- Develop ideas with observations and reflections on your experience.
- Revise in response to feedback from readers to improve and develop drafts.
- Compile a portfolio that reflects your best academic writing and demonstrates your understanding of the revision process.
- Use the conventions of scholarly research, analysis, and documentation.
- Use the conventions of academic and professional writing, including how to write clear, convincing prose. (*Student's Guide* 23)

In the beginning of English 102, students complete an interest inventory based on their majors or future academic interests; this statement becomes the basis for their semester-long inquiry. To develop this inquiry, the course is designed with four major assignments. These assignments enact a rhetorical approach to writing. Students first learn rhetorical analysis, then apply rhetorical skills to their own research-based persuasive essays, and finally analyze their own writing rhetorically. Below we briefly detail each assignment, thereby creating a framework through which to reflect on our administrative practices.

Rhetorical Analysis. The first essay of the second semester emphasizes a rhetorical approach to reading. Students are expected to "analyze and come to an interpretation of the purpose, audience, and context" of another author's text (*Student's Guide* 218). Through this assignment, students become aware of how rhetorical strategies function in different situations.

This portfolio assessment project created a unique rhetorical situation in which we were operating. We had to rely on voluntary participation of both students and their instructors in order to collect enough portfolios to make the assessment meaningful. To accomplish that task, we wrote detailed information sheets explaining the purposes and procedures of the portfolio assessment project to both instructors and students (see Appendices B and C). We wanted to make the rhetorical situation surrounding the tri-university grant clear. For example, the "Instructor Information Sheet" (Appendix B) states that "This project is completely separate from your students' performance in English 102, as well as your performance as an instructor. **All of the information gathered from University of Arizona student writings will be completely anonymous and will in no way affect student grades or instructor evaluations.**" We repeat this statement verbatim in the student information sheet (Appendix B). Despite these efforts, however, during a meeting with FYC instructors, some voiced concerns about the ways portfolio scores would be used. They were concerned that an analysis of student scores might affect their evaluations as instructors. Through that response, we realized we had not made our purposes clear enough. By analyzing our document rhetorically, we saw that although we indicated what scores would *not* be used for, we were not specific enough about what scores *would* be used for. While we did explain that the portfolio assessment's "goal is to identify learning outcomes in First-Year Composition by examining student portfolios" ("Student Information Sheet"), only by conducting a rhetorical analysis of our document after distributing it did we realize such a statement did not make our intended use of the portfolio scores clear enough to quell our instructors' concerns.

Whereas we as administrators were clear about the purpose of the assessment project, explaining its purpose to different audiences was difficult. Yet when we took on the role of the learner and enacted our curriculum, we realized a flaw in our documentation.

Persuasive Essay. This research-based assignment asks students to employ rhetorical techniques to persuade a defined audience. Students are expected to consider "the complexity of the question [they are] addressing, the many views people have on it, [their] intended audience, and research" (*Student's Guide* 263). Here students use strategies from the rhetorical analysis unit to examine secondary sources and construct independent arguments.

To garner support for our assessment project, we needed to persuade GATs to participate. As our instructor information sheet attests to, we strove to appeal to our audience's emotions by making them feel an integral part of this tri-university initiative. We attempted to arouse their emotions through explanations of their significant roles in completing a process already in

motion. For example, we explained, "GATs from the three universities have already collected and read portfolios from ASU and NAU, and this semester [they] are collecting portfolios from English 102 students at the UA" ("Instructor"). Our intention was to persuade our instructors to submit their students' portfolios so that we could collect enough scores to conduct a meaningful analysis of those scores. To respect our instructors' autonomy, we opted not to require participation in the project; instead we employed the traditional strategy of appealing to our readers' emotions to convince them to participate.

In looking back on this experience, feelings of regret seeped in. We realized we had not involved our instructors' voices enough during the invention process: we did not make use of Corder's ideal open and nonsequential invention process. Instead, we invented behind closed doors, and then we took our persuasive documents to our instructors. In assessing our work, we learned that new ideas could have been generated had we involved our instructors in our brainstorming. For example, even after the information sheets had been presented, we could have treated them as works-in-progress and conducted focus groups to generate more ideas from both instructors and students. We learned a valuable lesson about open invention and idea generation, a lesson that was only arrived at as we reflected upon one component of our curriculum—the persuasive essay assignment.

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Personal Reflective Essay. For the third essay of the semester, students reflect about their writing experiences. The assignment provides an "opportunity to grow personally and intellectually [. . .] a place to sort through [their] experiences" (*Student's Guide* 285). Through reflection, students transcend the boundaries of their FYC class to consider the full extent of their academic writing projects, and even those beyond the university.

In our assessment project, the primary purpose was to help the three university writing programs understand student learning; however, we also wanted to help our individual program. Reflection about our program helped us find specific ways the collected data could be useful. By the final day of the reading, we accumulated a great deal of valuable data—we successfully rated over 950 FYC portfolios. We then had to figure out what to do with the abundance of data.

After several meetings, we realized it was best to revisit the highest and lowest scoring portfolios in the hopes of identifying certain characteristics that contributed to strength and weaknesses. Working against a deadline, we dedicated about a month to rereading selected portfolios. We first selected 145 portfolios based on rater consistency. Next, we chose twenty portfolios to examine to norm ourselves as raters. After individually scoring the twenty, we discussed our ratings to reach agreement. Finally, the remaining portfolios were rated individually, and agreement (defined as ratings being within a one-point range) was reached on all of them.

The composite score breakdown of the selected portfolios is found in Table 3.

Table 3.

Selected Portfolios Composite Score Breakdown

Portfolio Score	Total Assessed
2	24
3	31
4	40
10	39
11	11

These composite scores are based on holistic readings of the portfolios and therefore do not detail student performance on particular traits from the rubric. To identify the specific characteristics that contributed to the holistic assessment, we conducted detailed trait scoring on all 145 selected portfolios.

It would be expected that a portfolio with a holistic score of "5," for example, would score similarly well in each of the individual traits. However, that was not always the case. In instances when portfolios deviated from the expected trait score, several anomalies occurred and are highlighted in bold type in Tables 4 through 8 below:

Table 4.

Writing Traits of the 24 Portfolios Receiving Composite Scores of "2"

Writing Traits	Number of essays scoring below composite score of "2"	Number of essays scoring above composite score of "2"
Reflection	NA	5
Evidence of Learning	NA	4
Development	NA	5
Organization	NA	7
Mechanics/Grammar	NA	6

Table 5.

Writing Traits of the 31 Portfolios Receiving Composite Scores of "3"

Writing Traits	Number of essays scoring below composite score of "3"	Number of essays scoring above a composite score of "3"
Reflection	NA	1
Evidence of Learning	NA	2
Development	NA	3
Organization	NA	2
Mechanics/Grammar	NA	6

Table 6.

Writing Traits of the 40 Portfolios Receiving Composite Scores of "4"

Writing Traits	Number of essays scoring below composite score of "4"	Number of essays scoring above composite score of "4"
Reflection	14	8
Evidence of Learning	13	4
Development	11	2
Organization	9	7
Mechanics/Grammar	7	8

Table 7.

Writing Traits of the 39 Portfolios Receiving Composite Scores of "10"

Writing Traits	Number of essays scoring below composite score of "10"	Number of essays scoring above composite score of "10"
Reflection	16	2
Evidence of Learning	17	1
Development	12	8
Organization	9	9
Mechanics/Grammar	10	4

Table 8.

Writing Traits of the 11 Portfolios Receiving Composite Scores of "11"

Writing Traits	Number of essays scoring below composite score of "11"	Number of essays scoring above composite score of "11"
Reflection	6	NA
Evidence of Learning	3	NA
Development	3	NA
Organization	1	NA
Mechanics/Grammar	2	NA

Scoring the portfolios on each category within the rubric, we discovered several interesting and unexpected characteristics of the strong and weak essays, as indicated in the tables above; those points were that

- Both strong and weak portfolios struggled with reflection and evidence of learning.
- Both strong and weak portfolios excelled at organizational strategies.
- Mechanics and grammar had no direct correlation to their overall success.

This newly acquired data let us reflect upon components of our curriculum and specific assignments. We attributed the strength in the essays' organization to our GAT training program and the *Student's Guide*. For example, the *Student's Guide* gives specific instruction regarding paragraph and idea development, the importance of clear topic sentences, specific illustrations, and in-depth explanation. We attributed weakness in reflection to our articulation of the assignment and our assignment sequence. For example, instead of having one large unit on reflection at the end of the semester, a stronger model might have students reflect about their writing from the

beginning of and throughout the semester. Only through engaging in the same type of reflection that we ask our students to do could we reach these conclusions about our assessment project.

Portfolio. The final assignment in FYC focuses on the revision of previous essays. Students learn that "Revision is a complex process consisting of *local* and *global* changes" (*Student's Guide* 305). Whereas students often come to FYC considering revision as strictly local, the portfolio promotes a new way of thinking. Revision becomes a wide-ranging process that addresses global concerns such as organization, development, and audience.

> Revision becomes a wide-ranging process that addresses global concerns. . .

While we are still involved in reflecting about some of our findings, our findings so far may lead to several significant changes within our program. Already we have begun revising the *Student's Guide* and some components of our GAT training. It is now appropriate to consider additional programmatic change. With a willingness to remain open in our thinking—an activity we often require of our students—our assessment project has the power to reshape our writing program into one that is more collaborative, inquiring, and reflective than it already is.

Creating a Reflective Community

Even though the main purposes of the portfolio project were collaboration and assessment, we realized the potential for closely examining our curriculum and program. Reflecting about our practices through the lens of our curriculum and thereby opening up our inventive processes afforded us the opportunity to assess ourselves. Taking the opportunity to learn about student development and broadening it into a chance for professional reflection helped us discover new insights into our program—insights that will help us better foster student-centered learning. Furthermore, the chance to collaborate with our peer institutions enabled us to view our program in a new way and allowed us to understand the uniqueness of our writing community. Had we not taken on the learner's role—à la Corder—we would have been less able to view assessment as a form of inquiry as the WPA position statement encourages.

Regarding the exigency of "Focused Excellence" currently confronting our university, the reflective process we advocate provides and generates data that will support our department's concern with improving upon what we do best. As writing teachers, we aim to develop curricula and programs that relate to and build on our faculty and students' strengths in the hopes of attaining consistency in higher standards. The process of collaborating with

other programs, our instructors, and our students and reflecting on the collected data, as we have done in this article, demonstrates to upper administration our commitment to advancing knowledge.

As Tom Hemmeter points out, there is an "almost universal understanding of writing programs as living entities" (29). In other words, writing programs themselves must be envisioned as learners. To grow and thrive they must engage in discourse. They must collaborate with other communities. They must reflect about their practices, especially those practices involved with assessment. Luckily for us, the Arizona Board of Regents Tri-university Grant provided these opportunities. According to J. Michael Hogan's *Rhetoric and Community,* communities are "living creatures, nurtured and nourished by rhetorical discourse" (292). In other words, writing programs must view themselves as dynamic, living creatures able to adapt to their environments. Whether writing programs are or are not faced with local pressures similar to Arizona's "Focused Excellence," becoming learners provides an opportunity for writing programs to continually revise and remake themselves through collaboration and reflective practice.

Appendix A

Portfolio Scoring Rubric

Traits of Essays	1	2	3	4	5	6
Reflection (Shows self-awareness of improvement as writer)	Minimal	Minor	Passable	Adequate	Thoughtful	Significant
Evidence of Learning (Discusses ability to do rhetorical analysis, research, and revision)	Minimal	Minor	Passable	Adequate	Much	Significant

Development (Illustrates claims with specific and concrete reference)	Minimal	Minor	Passable	Adequate	Effective	Thorough
Organization (Follows clear structure and logical pattern)	Minimal	Minor	Passable	Adequate	Effective	Skillful
Mechanics/ Grammar (Demonstrates understanding of correct usage)	Weak	Ineffective	Passable	Adequate	Effective	Skillful

Appendix B

Instructor Information Sheet

Arizona Portfolio Initiative: *Instructor Information Sheet*

This semester, your English 102 students are participating in the Arizona Board of Regents Tri-University Portfolio Initiative. This project aims to strengthen the connection between the writing programs of the three Arizona state universities: ASU, NAU, and UA. Its goal is to identify learning outcomes in first-year composition (FYC) by examining student portfolios. The GATs from the three universities have already collected and read portfolios from ASU and NAU and this semester are collecting portfolios from English 102 students at the UA. This project is completely separate from your students' performance in English 102, as well as your performance as an instructor. **All of the information gathered from University of Arizona student writings will be completely anonymous and will in no way affect student grades or instructor evaluations.** No GATs will be required to work beyond the end of the semester, but stipends will be available to those interested in volunteering to participate in the reading sessions.

On the day your portfolios are due, please ask your students to bring two complete copies, prepared according to the format established on the *Student Information Sheet*. If your individual portfolio assignment requires texts in addition to those listed on the *Student Information Sheet*, your students need not include those additional texts in the copy to be submitted for the Portfolio Initiative. For the copy of the portfolio we will be collecting, we ask that you follow these steps:

- Distribute the *Student Information Sheet* and the *Portfolio Identification Form* to your students.
- Make sure all portfolios follow the format established on the *Student Information Sheet*.
- Collect portfolios from your students between April 15 and April 22, 2004, and bring them to the Writing Program (location TBA).

We appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

APPENDIX C

Student Information Sheet

Arizona Portfolio Initiative: *Student Information Sheet*

Instructors and students at ASU, NAU, and UA are participating in an initiative to improve the teaching of composition. Instructors from all three universities have already collected and read portfolios from ASU and NAU and will now collect portfolios at the UA. **All of the information gathered from University of Arizona student writings will be completely anonymous and will in no way affect student grades or instructor evaluations.**

Objectives

Based on the English 102 course goals stated in *A Student's Guide to First-Year Composition* (see p. 31), your portfolio should show that you have accomplished the following objectives:

- Ability to do *rhetorical analysis* by analyzing how a writer addresses a particular context with appropriate text choices and using that knowledge in your writing.
- Ability to do *research* by locating, evaluating, integrating, and correctly documenting evidence drawn from sources.
- Ability to *revise* your own writing based on feedback from readers and your understanding of standard English mechanics and grammar.
- Ability to *discuss* and *analyze* your writing and revising processes.

Documents

Your portfolio should include the following four documents:

1. The *Portfolio Identification Form*
2. A *Cover Memo*
3. Your *Revised Rhetorical Analysis*
4. Your *Revised Persuasive Essay*

Cover Memo

In about three pages, your cover memo should do the following:

- Reflect upon the course goals for English 102 and explain how you have satisfied, or are working to satisfy, them.
- Use an organizational structure that best explains your learning by developing specific claims about your revisions.
- Cite specific evidence from both your *Revised Rhetorical Analysis* and your *Revised Persuasive Essay* that demonstrates your claims. An example might be, "This semester I learned how to consider my audience. For example, on page 15 of my portfolio, in the second highlighted section, I demonstrate this skill when I provide the definition of 'hydrology,' a word with which my readers might not be familiar. By providing such definitions for my readers, I

avoid sounding pretentious, a tone many readers dislike, which has improved my writing."

Format

- Remove your name and instructor name from all documents except the "Portfolio Identification Form" (this form will be removed during the reading).
- Number all pages consecutively on the top right, starting with the first page of your *Cover Memo*. For example, if your *Cover Memo* is three pages long, these will be pages 1, 2, and 3. Then page 4 will be the first page of your *Revised Rhetorical Analysis*.
- On your final drafts, highlight in yellow all areas that represent revisions you have made from previous drafts.

In a standard pocket folder, arrange the documents in this order, keeping the first item on top:

Left Pocket	Right Pocket
Portfolio Identification Form	*Cover Memo* *Revised Rhetorical Analysis* *Revised Persuasive Essay*

Notes

1   insights into WPA assessment can be gleaned from: Duane Roen, Barry Maid, Gregory Glau, John Ramage, and David Schwalm's "Reconsidering and Assessing the Work of Writing Program Administrators."

2   More information regarding Tri-University Proposal: Evaluating Learner-Centered Education through Outcomes Assessment of Student Writing can be found at <http://www.abor.asu.edu>. Path: Search this Site: Sibylle.

3   As a requirement for all first-year students at the U of A, FYC consists of a two-course sequence. Most students take English 101/102. English 107/108 is the equivalent sequence for ESL students, while English 103H/104H is an honors

sequence. In addition, the writing program also offers English 100, a developmental course taken prior to 101, and its ESL equivalent, English 106. Finally, some students find themselves in English 109H, a one-semester course reserved for those with exceptional scores in AP or IB English courses in high school.

4   The *WPA Outcomes Statement* is available at <http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>.

5   At the University of Arizona reading, there were eleven table leaders overseeing six or seven readers each.

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