ENV201 Writing Development Initiative Final Report: 2014-15
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1. Summary of Writing Instruction and Student Writing Activities

WDI-Supported Course Structure

For the third year, a Writing Development Initiative award allowed for additional instruction in ENV201 that emphasized writing styles used in upper-level ENV courses and by environmental professionals. Through the WDI, (1) TAs were able to attend the RGASC Writing TA Training Program to ensure they had the necessary knowledge to support instruction and assessment of student writing, (2) four additional writing-based tutorial sessions were offered, (3) four writing-focused assignments were used, and (4) TAs were able to grade an additional assignment (as compared to non-WDI offerings of ENV201).

The WDI-supported writing tutorials occurred every other week, opposite the traditional discussion-based tutorials. This created a structure where an assignment was introduced in a discussion-based tutorial; the following week the writing-based tutorial addressed the type of writing required by the assignment; and the third week students turned in their assignments, discussed the topic associated with the assignment, and received the next assignment. The cycle repeated itself over nine tutorial sessions (5 discussion-based and 4 writing-focused) and four written assignments.

Mirroring past WDI years, the TAs were provided with detailed packets for each writing tutorial session, which have been updated and improved over the last three years. Each packet includes (1) the central learning objective(s) of that tutorial-assignment pair, (2) a script outlining the background information to be provided to students in tutorial (e.g. definitions of summarize and paraphrase), (3) slides and/or handouts to accompany the script, (4) an in-class exercise directly related to the skills associated with the learning objective, and (5) detailed information on the assignment requirements and assessment criteria. The packets were given to the TAs at least two weeks prior to the writing tutorial to ensure instruction and assignment information in all tutorial sections was consistent.

Details of Writing Activities and Supporting Instructions

The writing assignments and tutorial sessions addressed the following four areas:

1. Critical Reading: For the first assignment, students were asked to read a scholarly journal article and answer questions related to its structure and content. A discussion of the content of the article occurred during the following discussion tutorial. The writing tutorial that supports this assignment focused on the structure of scholarly articles and strategies to critical read this type of material. The rationale for beginning with a critical reading activity is that students need to be able to read and understand scholarly written material before they can be expected to

incorporate information from scholarly work into their own writing. The TAs also presented norms around citing others work.

2. *Paraphrases, Summarize, and Synthesis:* For the second assignment, students were asked to summarize and synthesize several readings related to a case study that is further explored through a roll play-stakeholder negotiation in the following discussion tutorial. The writing tutorial that supports this assignment defined and provided strategies for paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesis. Proper representation and citation of others work when summarizing and synthesis were also discussed.

3. *Summarizing Key Results from Empirical Data Tables:* For the third assignment, students were asked to write methods, results and discussion related to data they collect and analyze. Their results formed the basis of the next discussion tutorial. The writing tutorial supporting this assignment focused on the IMRD model of scholarly writing, with particular emphasis on verb tense and the distinct types of information that should be included in the methods, results, and discussion sections.

4. *Persuasive Essay:* For the last assignment, students were asked to write an essay supporting a particular position, drawing on evidence from a variety of sources, and providing rebuttals for arguments supporting the alternative position. The assignment provided the material used in a class debate during the following discussion tutorial. The writing tutorial supporting this assignment included strategies to organize a persuasive essay, with emphasis on refuting counter-arguments to strengthen one's own position.

2. Project's Effectiveness

This WDI reached the 153 students enrolled in the course. As ENV201 is a required course for all Specialists, Majors, and Minors in Environmental Management and Environmental Science, this initiative ensures all ENV students received this instruction.

Based on the 2013 Student Opinion Survey, students felt that the writing tutorials helped develop their paper writing skills (median and mode = 4) and the TA instruction helped students effectively work on their assignments (median = 4, mode = 5). The same questions were selected by the instructor for inclusion on the 2014 SOS, but were not asked due to an error in the computerized SOS.

The course had two TAs delivering the tutorial material and marking the majority of assignments. One TA has been part of the course for five years, as a TA with and without a WDI, and also serving as the course instructor on two occasions. This was the first TA assignment for the other tutorial TA, but she has extensive teaching experience including a degree from teachers college. Overall the course benefited from such highly knowledgeable TAs. The long-time TA feels that the quality of the students' assignments has improved with the adoption of the writing tutorials. The first time TA appreciated the information provided during the two-day TA training event, and felt that the students really needed the instruction on proper citation methods based on her interactions during the tutorial sessions.

Although the TAs and I feel that the tutorials improve student writing, and some students appreciate the tutorials and assignments (based on the 2013 SOS), some students do not. As one student wrote in this year's SOS, "Rather than learning more about the course we were doing activities that high school students are learnt i.e. learning how to make an essay, what is a thesis, etc. I found it very juvenile." Another commented: "I felt like the tutorials were a little bit pointless but I understand the need for students to practice those skills. I didn't feel like they helped me with the material though." These comments highlight an attitude that has been expressed each year the course has had a WDI, and I believe speaks to a larger issue detailed in the next section.

3. Future Steps and Needed Improvements

Over the last three years, I have modified the WDI related tutorials and assignments based on student and TA feedback. I believe that these activities are now focused on concrete learning objectives that are clearly presented and reinforced through in and out of class hands-on exercises. There are a few minor areas within the course and two UTM-wide issues that need to be addresses to achieve the broad goal of improving students' written communication skills.

ENV201

Within ENV201, we need to continue to improve instruction around citing scholarly material. Students know they cannot copy-and-paste but are still weak at summarizing and paraphrasing others' work. Specific strategies on how to do this, especially when one is newly familiar with the subject material, are needed. Additionally, student struggle with the discussion portion of the IMRD assignment; additional guidance on what to write about in a discussion section is needed.

UTM

There are two broader limitations associated with this WDI that based on my multi-year experience with the WDI program require attention at the UTM-level. First, students need much more practice with correct grammar and paper structure, through detailed feedback of their written work that is beyond the scope of this course (even with a WDI). We do not and should not have to provide instruction on basic paragraph structure and/or crafting informative and concise sentences. Yet this is the type of instruction many students need.

Second, some (although not all) students are confused by the writing-focus in an environment course. They see it as taking time away from instruction on content of the course and they do not see the relationship between subject-specific course work and writing. I believe this is in part because UTM does not emphasis writing instruction, outside on a varied set of WDIs, so students believe that learning to write is something they did in secondary school and should not be part of their university education. UTM certainly reinforces this belief. A required first year writing course would both dispel the notion that writing instruction and improvement ends with secondary school, while also actually helping students develop their writing skills.