Using VALUE Rubrics to Have an Impact on Learning

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Drake University is currently working with four of the VALUE rubrics: critical thinking, written communication, information literacy, and teamwork. Drake faculty and staff adapted these rubrics to align with the intended outcomes shared in the Drake curriculum (i.e., general education) and our mission explication.

Our initial efforts are to apply rubrics through our First-Year Seminar (FYS) courses, which emphasize critical thinking, written communication, and information literacy. Over the course of several years, Drake University faculty explored first-year students’ ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills in their written work. In 2007, 2008, and 2011, faculty members from various disciplines collaborated in applying Drake’s critical thinking rubric (adopted by the faculty senate in May 2006) to student papers collected from FYS courses. Faculty members rated a total of eighty-six samples of first-year student work across the three years.

In addition to our work with critical thinking rubrics, the written communication and information literacy rubrics are shared with all FYS instructors to guide curricular development and assessment efforts. The rubrics also inform faculty development programs where select faculty members engage in an effort to design assignments that enhance student learning in written communication or information literacy. We are piloting the assessment of student work samples this summer and fall, with the intention of wide-scale assessment of FYS work samples in 2013.

Drake also uses the VALUE rubrics to support cocurricular assessment. For example, the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership uses the teamwork rubric as a foundation for assessment with the student activities board. Students complete a self-rating instrument as a pre- and post-measurement tool and discuss progress in relation to the criteria with student life staff.
Actions to Improve Learning in Critical Thinking

As a result of our critical thinking assessment, the 2011 faculty reviewers found that overall scores were higher for the “communication” and “organization” criteria, a consistent trend across three years. They noticed few student errors in grammar and that, in most samples, they could follow the student’s argument. The faculty also noted lower scores for “evidence support” and “assumptions and alternatives.” The group commented that students cited evidence, but tended to select evidence that supported their arguments. Based on their review of student work, the 2011 faculty reviewers concluded that students need support to engage in higher-level thinking, that assignment design is important, and that students struggle with assumptions/alternatives.

The information in figure 1 below represents the percentage of first-year student papers with a median critical thinking score that was “marginal” or “unsatisfactory” for each criterion by year.

Figure 1. Percentage of FYS papers receiving a median rating of “less than satisfactory.”

These results provide a foundation for critical conversations among faculty about ways to support student learning in this area. The results have already informed the planning and design of a May 2012 faculty development workshop at which strategies for addressing the three themes noted above will be considered and examples of best practices for enhancing student’s critical thinking skills will be developed. Participating faculty will revise or create assignments that they
intend to use for an upcoming course, distribute those assignments to workshop participants, and engage in follow-up assessment efforts looking at student work that responds to the assignments.

**Future Plans**

We plan to use the written communication and information literacy rubrics to systematically assess samples of FYS student work starting this fall semester. In addition, we are inquiring about the consequences of our work with students in the areas of engaged citizenship and global and cultural understanding. We are at the beginning stages of discussing criteria to assess student work in these areas—work that will draw upon the relevant VALUE rubrics. Over time, we will expand these efforts to include the other requirements in the Drake curriculum. Drake also hopes to expand the use of rubrics/criteria as communication and assessment tools that are widely shared by students, staff, and faculty. Our efforts to use this information will be essential if we are to achieve the exceptional learning environment promised in our mission statement.