

Communicate - Comprehend, Compose, Convey: A QEP White Paper

By Karen Mongo

I. Problem – Rationale for this Topic

The decline in Americans' reading and writing skills has "demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications" (Workforce Management). The latest report to sound this alarm was published last month by the National Endowment for the Arts, which concluded that employers ranked reading and writing as the top deficiency in new hires.

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges suggests the problem is not that students cannot write. Rather, it is that they cannot write well enough for their higher education discipline and their professional environment afterward. As the National Assessments of Educational Progress report states, "few [students] are able to create precise, engaging, coherent prose."

Reported in *The 2007 Survey on Teaching Writing*, Americans believe that good writing skills are more important than ever, but they fear that our schools and our children are falling behind. Two-thirds of the public would like to see more resources invested in helping teachers teach writing. And 74 percent think writing should be taught in all subjects and at all grade levels. These messages and others were drawn from survey participants of all income and education levels and all geographic areas.

"There is substantial consensus on the importance of communication skills in the general education of students. Virtually every college or university mission statement makes the development of communication skills a central educational goal. There is also widespread acknowledgement of the vital importance of oral communication in the personal, professional, and civic lives of graduates Preparation for life in the modern world requires communication with a cross-section of diverse people who often have conflicting needs and interests. Perhaps more than ever, educated persons need to communicate with sensitivity and skill with those of widely different backgrounds, cultural experiences and values." - National Communication Association Policy Platform Statement

El Centro College

A review of data from the past three years, compiled by our Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment, reveals that an increasing number of our First Time in College (FTIC) students are testing into lower levels of

developmental reading and writing courses. Given the importance of communication skills throughout the curriculum (as identified in the curriculum maps), this poses a unique challenge for the entire college with its impact being far reaching. Further, information gathered during QEP Topic Awareness Sessions reveals anecdotal examples of too many of our students having poor reading, writing and speaking skills.

Since we serve such a diverse population, one contributing factor may be what some researchers have termed linguistic and cultural diversity. This notion considers the influence of other languages, patterns of speech, or other varieties of English (dialects, slang, etc.) on students' ability to read, write, and speak Standard American English.

A number of our reading and writing faculty list accurate course placement of students and a more effective assessment instrument as a major concern. They have been very vocal about what they believe is the ineffectiveness of the Accuplacer to assess writing as well as making better use of the COMPASS to assess reading. In reading specifically, students who are placed into the lowest level of DREA are often better suited for an ESOL reading course. Others who enroll in a higher level of DREA have a course failure rate of 81-100%. Similarly, in DWRI courses, students have a failure rate of 76-80%. To some extent, this validates the claims posited by those who support addressing linguistic and cultural diversity in the teaching of reading, writing, and speaking.

II. Learning Audience

Faculty, students, administrators and professional support staff all comprise the learning audience for this topic.

In order to improve students' communication skills, faculty will need to be involved in the process to review and possibly revise how they are assessing communication (reading, writing, and speaking) as already identified in their curriculum maps. This could lead to pedagogical changes in how reading, writing, and speaking are taught.

Students will be more aware of the importance of effective communication to success in their academic lives but also in their professional and personal lives.

Administrators and professional support staff will need to review current practices and determine the most effective ways to assess students so that they will be placed in the courses that will lead to improved learning and greater academic success overall.

III. Learning Objective

The main objective would be to provide students with greater opportunities for experiences and instruction in reading, writing, and speaking. Students improve reading, writing, and speaking skills by doing more reading, writing, and speaking. More specifically, the objectives for students will include:

1. Reading to identify key issues,
2. Organizing ideas,
3. Conducting valid research,
4. Being able to write essays and papers that are generally free of errors in grammar, punctuation, and word usage,
5. Adapting content and style to audience and environment,
6. Presenting ideas (oral and written) in a clear, concise, and coherent manner.

IV. Possible Delivery Method(s)

Professional Development for faculty, administrators, and professional support staff will involve opportunities to collaborate on the role of communication throughout the college curriculum.

At the course level, faculty who identify assessment of communication skills in their curriculum maps will play an integral role in collaborating on best practices to integrate those assessments within the content of their courses and will develop rubrics that effectively assess course content as well as applicable communication skills. These rubrics may be used across the college curriculum.

In addition to professional development workshops for employees, student support/service areas will be involved as they expand their offerings to possibly include additional tutorials and modules that will provide students with added opportunities to improve their reading, writing, and speaking skills.

V. Possible Ways to Measure Outcomes

Assessment will continue to take place at the course level, but also outcomes can be measured by reviewing quantitative data that point to improvement in reading, writing, and speaking. Scored rubrics will provide detailed feedback that can be stored in the assessment module for SPOL and will track students' improvement.

Some faculty have suggested using e-Portfolio or social networking media as a way to track student performance and improvement.

VI. Resources That Might be Required

I believe the largest cost to this time (a scarce resource) needed for professional development. Further, any decision to purchase software to track and store student data may need to be purchased with the costs split between the college and students (i.e., e-Portfolio).