

Introduction: How Professors Read Student Writing

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In June 2016, some 25 University of Denver professors from departments across campus analyzed selected student writings from either a First-Year Seminar (FSEM) or an Advanced Seminar (ASEM) that they'd taught in the previous year. We met for half a day to discuss how and why to analyze student writing, and how to use what we might learn in the process. My Writing Program colleague Brad Benz helped plan and lead this workshop. Participants then had three days to complete a brief written analysis. A schedule for the workshop and process appears as Appendix A of this document. The original call for participation, which outlines the scope of the project, appears as Appendix B.

DU began requiring FSEM for all incoming students in the fall of 2006. While the course was originally conceived as “writing intensive,” that feature was soon broadened to be “student engagement intensive.” Most FSEM sections, then and now, require significant amounts of student writing, as writing is well established as both a profound means of engagement and a tool for learning. Also in 2006, DU began requiring a writing-intensive core class for all students, a requirement that by 2010 had been revised into an Advanced Seminar. In terms of writing, these classes had four specific characteristics: 1) students were to complete at least 20 pages of writing, in 2) at least three different projects, 3) with some of that writing revised after professor feedback, in 4) sections that devoted at least some class time to writing activities and instruction. All faculty teaching ASEM participate in a three-day workshop on writing, for which they receive an honorarium of \$1000. A more thorough overview of writing at DU, excerpted from another publication, appears as Appendix C.

The June 2016 enterprise had two main goals and a secondary one. First, the project provided a pretext for conversations among a wide swath of faculty about writing, assignment-making, and student performances. Since 2006, there has been a rich tradition of faculty attention to writing at the University of Denver, in seminars and workshops, both formal and informal. This has been especially true for professors teaching in the FSEM and ASEM programs, who have gathered each June to reflect back with one another on their previous year's experiences. These efforts have yielded two published collections of faculty essays, a one-day symposium, and numerous incidental projects. One significant collaborative research project resulted in a peer reviewed journal article about ASEM writing, [“Assessing a Writing Intensive General Education Capstone: Research as Faculty Development.”](#) We found that campus conversations are enhanced by concrete examples of local practices: assignments, grading processes, sample materials, classroom practices, and the like. Considering what DU students actually do in response to writing assignments created a new focus for conversation. People got to peer into one another's syllabi, assignments, and thought processes.

Second, and more importantly, the project afforded individuals a chance to reflect on their expectations for student writing. All of us draft writing assignments with certain goals in mind, including the learning objectives the writing will further and how we expect the student writers to meet them. We strike a balance between existing abilities and the kinds of

challenges that push learning, between creating tasks that provide enough specificity to encourage success, but not so much constraint as to inhibit exploration. In any given assignment, we fiddle with whether to stipulate audience, genre, purpose, format, source materials, drafts, conventions, grading criteria, and so on—and if so, to what degree. We create the best assignments under those constraints, and then we send them off, often to be surprised with the writing that students produce in response. Often they do better, often worse, and often something completely different than we expected. Seeing what students actually produce provides insight about how we might shape future assignments or design pedagogies that bring student performance closer to our expectations, and vice versa.

Third, and as a secondary consequence of the first two goals, the writings gathered here provide a snapshot of the state of writing in FSEM and ASEM. The assignments show an exciting range of practices across disciplines, faculty, and course topics. The student writings, as characterized, demonstrate how our students actually engage those practices.

What follows are, for the most part, first drafts, produced by faculty in a limited time under some constraints, subjected to minimal editing, as Brad explains below. There were some 25 participants in the workshop, and from them Brad selected some fewer pieces to represent the range of work.

Our formatting has been minimal, aided by Lauren Salvador, the Writing Program's Office Manager. One thing we did was to put in Courier typeface extended chunks of student writing. We did this to remind ourselves where we might need permission from student authors before any possible wider publication of their work. (We wouldn't be fine publishing certain essays to wider audiences without student permission.) As it stands, we're confident that we've been fair (and legal) to quote student work in this fashion for professional teaching development purposes with DU faculty.

I hope you'll enjoy peering into your colleagues' classrooms and minds as much as Brad and I have.