Fall 2021 COM assessment: Some broad trends
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In Fall 2021, UW offered 198 sections (taught by 131 distinct instructors) related to COM course delivery. Every instructor of COM courses received a request to submit assessment data for *one* of the COM courses they taught. A total of 92 submissions were received for a response rate of 70.2%.

Instructor Evaluation of Student Work

Each instructor who participated was asked to report *three* students' performance on either a written or oral assignment for the course. Thus, the total data for this assessment was approximately 275 individual pieces of student work). Evaluation of performance was based on AAC&U's VALUE rubric for Written Communication *or* Oral Communication. Average instructor evaluations scores are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Average rubric scores of student written work by COM level					
	Context	Content	Conventions	Sourcing	Grammar
COM1 (26)	3.09	2.87	2.86	2.84	2.97
COM2 (18)	3.17	3.04	2.91	3.02	2.98
COM3 (32)	3.25	3.20	3.11	3.06	3.04

Table 2. Average rubric scores of student oral presentation by COM level					
	Organization	Language	Delivery	Support	Message
COM2 (8)	3.50	3.54	3.50	3.25	3.50
COM3 (8)	3.50	3.50	3.38	3.42	3.67

Two trends stand out:
1. Student written work is rated more highly in more advanced courses. For nearly all criteria, students in more COM3 received higher scores than did students in COM2 or in COM1. Though encouraging, one should be careful not to draw longitudinal conclusions about these results.
2. Average oral presentation scores are higher than average scores for written work. Most scores for written work grouped around 3.0, while scores for oral presentations grouped around 3.5. This might suggest that students are stronger speakers than they are written communicators; alternately, it may suggest that faculty have relatively lower expectations for students' speaking than they do for students' writing.

Trends in Assignment Types and Descriptions

In addition to their evaluation of student work, instructors were also asked to describe or upload the assignment description that guided student work. As an illustration of the breadth of genres students may experience as part of their undergraduate course work, below is a partial list of assignment titles from Fall 2021.

Researched Argument

Creative Response and Critical Reflection

Final Reflection Essay

Thematic Argument Essay

Creative Response

Core Assignment #1 Final Essay (part 4 of 4 scaffolded assignments)

Storytelling Script Draft

Close Reading Essay

Environmental Justice Case Study

Field Training MFR

Fact/Value Outline

Research Review Final Draft

Teacher Development Project

Practicum Reflection

Primary Source Analysis Paper 3

Research Paper Prospectus

Instructional strategies paper/project

Instructional Strategies Paper Final Draft

Instructional Strategies Research Paper

Proposal Memo

Project proposal

Instructional Document

Case Study 1: 'Even Robots Need a House': The Robotic Milking System Facility Investment Decision Case Study

Fundraising Letter

Curriculum Portfolio and Education Reflection

Unit Plan Research Paper-- Final Draft

Blog 3

Theory Research Reflection

Cultural Immersion Paper

Book Review

White Paper

Clinical Laboratory Improvement Act (CLIA) Project Final Written Report

NSF-style Grant Proposal

Research Sequence Final Draft

Reading Analysis Essay

Community Based Art Project Proposal

Grant Proposal

Executive Summary (of research articles)

Company Research Report

Final Capstone Project Paper (Group Project)

Trip Report Memo

Strategy Statement

Gallery Walk Poster and Reflection

Final Historiography Paper

Term Project Symposium Presentation

'This I Believe' Audio Essay

Final Role Play Assignment

Classroom Management Research Presentation

Lab 4: Patient Counseling with a New Prescription

Digital Portfolio Presentation

Teacher Work Sample (TWS) Presentation

Career Search Interview

Magazine Market Study Report and Presentation

One way of exploring those assignment descriptions is by connecting them to national scholarship on higher education learning. The American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) lists ten types of experiences (including writing-intensive courses) that contribute to transformational undergraduate educational opportunities; Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) found that these practices share eight key elements. Across the full set of COM course assignments, there is evidence of opportunity for students to engage with all eight key elements of high-impact learning:

1. Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels
2. Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time
3. Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
4. Experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those which students are familiar
5. Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback
6. Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning
7. Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
8. Public demonstration of competence.

Assignment titles and descriptions reveal that student writing was often part of extended, ongoing, and iterative projects—often guided by quite extensive performance expectations. Assignments, especially at the COM1 and COM2 levels, encouraged students to consider multiple perspectives and to step outside of familiar viewpoints. At the upper level, many assignments asked students to collaborate with peers and engage in application of disciplinary or professional knowledge. A number of assignments across all levels encouraged students to reflect (to an internal audience) or to consider specific external/public audiences. Expectations for synthesis and response to feedback were visible in many assignments as well. It also appears that students are being asked to produce works of varying lengths, from informal single-page reflections to thoroughly revised formal papers of fifteen pages or more.

On a more critical note: In many assignments, instructor expectations for "what" (content) and "how" (format) seemed to be more explicit than their expectations for "why" (purpose) and "for whom" (audience). One possible area for improvement would be more direct guidance about the rhetorical situation for students' writing and speaking. Given the impressive range of purposes for which students are asked to write (e.g., analysis, instruction, exposition, critique, reflection, argumentation, application, etc.), teachers may benefit from asking students about their past writing exposure and their beliefs about which skills they think will transfer into a new writing setting.

References / For Further Reading

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