

THE EXPERIENCE OF 100-LEVEL UNIVERSITY CORE A, 2009-2010

This report is meant to document the progress of and problems with the 100-level courses of University Core A in its initial roll-out for fall 2009 (CORE 101) and the beginning of spring 2010 (CORE 102), particularly as it has affected the faculty and graduate students involved in the English Department mentoring program for graduate teaching assistants and fellows. The overriding problem with the experience was the speed of its implementation and the refusal of the administration to allow the courses to be piloted. There was also a major disconnect between the theory of the new program and its implementation.

Problem One: Lack of preparation time for course roll-out

Description: A one-week workshop in May, a 3-day workshop in August for those who were not able to attend in May, occasional meetings in fall to prepare for Core 102 in spring, and the availability of core coordinators was not enough preparation for bringing faculty members educated and experienced in the teaching of writing up to the level of faculty members educated and experienced in the teaching of oral communication and logic (from a strict, vocabulary-centric viewpoint familiar to those in the discipline of philosophy). Although the English Department teaching corps had previously included oral presentations and applied critical thinking skills in English 101 and 102, they had not delivered these in the disciplinary ways that faculty schooled in those disciplines could.

Solution: Although these instructors may “grow into” the class, much of the mentors’ confidence, as well as their desire to instruct the teaching assistants and fellows, has waned, due to the various frustrations caused by the rigid class designs. The only solution acceptable is to move back to ENGL 101 and 102, with disciplinary emphasis on the teaching of writing, with objectives in oral communication and critical thinking being addressed via application, as they have traditionally been addressed in English 101 and 102 and successfully assessed in the past.

Problem Two: Too much content for the 14-week semester

Description: Because of the number of assignments that included reflections, quizzes, and speeches, as well as the inordinate amount of time needed to explain and troubleshoot the technology, the faculty found discussion time to be limited, which most severely affected their ability to instill critical thinking about the readings in the courses. We in English believe that critical thinking is more than memorizing terms like “premises” and “conclusions”; instead, we believe that we should model to students how to encounter and process what they read so they can identify meaning and be able to respond to it. In Core 102, the requirement of two complete speeches is severely affecting the amount of time faculty should spend on critical reading and research techniques.

Solution: The faculty have been encouraged to combine objectives and reduce the number of assignments, but there seems to be an inordinate number of objectives that require such disparate skills that the depth of learning still seems to be sacrificed.

Problem Three: Required use of technology (uploading of assignments to an e-portfolio and quizzes based on modules that reinforce certain objectives).

Description: The delivery of this part of the course was compromised primarily by failures of the Web CT system; although progress was made in the prior spring to purchase a more reliable course management system, this was not able to be delivered prior to the start of fall 2009 classes. Additionally, the modules and quizzes (many of which were created by Pearson publishers) were delivered in early August, and were found to be less than satisfactory by the ad hoc Core A Committee. Nevertheless, they were still required. This resulted in too little lead time for the faculty to be able to be trained (and then to train their new graduate teaching assistants) in the delivery of the module quizzes. They were also not given enough time to accord what was in the modules with the course they were to teach. Once classes began, faculty found many of the modules to duplicate what they were teaching or to be beneath a college-level learning experience. To complicate this, the technology failed so that a quiz worth 10 points often gave a student 14 or 15 points, or (since students were permitted to take a quiz as many times as needed to get 80% or better, a requirement to pass the course), often the system would not register more than one attempt at the quiz.

Solution: The problems became so frequent that the ad hoc Core A Committee reversed the necessity of the modules and quizzes early in the semester, but this compromised the integrity of instructors who had previously granted students credit for the quizzes. For spring 2010, the modules were made optional, although the Core A Committee thought they would be good optional practice for students who are not yet ready for the 200-level Core courses. The English Department chairperson has asked that the technological component of the courses be implemented only after a stable course management system is available and a full-time person is hired to handle problems with the technology and delivery of the e-portfolio system.

Problem Four: Required textbooks and assignments

Description: Although the English faculty agreed to the objectives and included them in their course designs, they found the custom Core A Handbook to be not as useful as previous books they had used, and they found the THiNK textbook (meant to deliver lessons in logic and critical thinking) to be undesirable. There was also insufficient material for students to read that would allow them to practice their critical thinking and model their writing assignments, so that faculty added to the expense by needing to require an additional book of readings. Additionally, the assignments created by the Core A Committee were so specific that they often resulted in a course that looked haphazardly prepared, rather than the seamless learning experiences that faculty had been creating in their syllabi for freshman composition courses in previous semesters.

Solution: The current Core A coordinator has been working to unpack the Core A Handbook so that material for all 4 Core A courses is not together, with the intention of lessening the students' expense. The mentors are also exploring other ways of delivering the critical thinking component of CORE 101 and 102 rather than using the

THiNK textbook. Nothing has been done yet to loosen up the assignments. The instructors do not object to fulfilling the course objectives as put together by the entire faculty, but they would like to have the authority to do it in their own, experienced way. Nevertheless, many of the objectives are too diverse to include in a 14-week course that makes coherent sense to the students taking it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the current situation that places responsibility for CORE 101 and 102 in the English Department, particularly for issues of staffing and oversight, but also to ensure the adequate preparation of the instructors and the teaching according to the objectives of the courses, be permanently assured in writing.
2. That the 100-level University Core A courses be dual-listed as CORE/ENGL 101 and CORE/ENGL 102 to facilitate transfer in and out of Radford University.
3. That the Core Coordinators that assist the instructors of CORE 101 and 102 with the assignments outside of their immediate discipline continue to meet regularly with the CORE 101/102 instructors to aid them as needed, but not to mandate how these elements are taught in the courses.

Rosemary Guruswamy, Chair, Department of English

Faculty Mentors: Frank Napolitano, Coordinator
Rick Van Noy
Erin Webster-Garrett
Renee Dickinson
Kim Gainer
Jeff Saperstein
Don Secreast

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