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CLA report

Gregory Rich

Fayetteville State University, grich@uncfsu.edu

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CLA Project Report
Gregory Rich, Professor of Philosophy
Government and History Department
Fayetteville State University
Fayetteville, North Carolina 28301
910-672-1045
grich@uncfsu.edu

1. Course information

- a. In what course(s) did you administer your CLA performance task?

I administered my CLA performance task in three sections of Philosophy 110, Critical Thinking.

- b. Please indicate if the majority of students enrolled in this class are freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

Almost all of the seventy-five students in these classes were freshmen.

2. Performance task

- a. What was the task?

After working with other philosophy faculty to create a complete seven-document ninety-minute CLA performance task on the model of the crime reduction performance task, I decided to shorten the task to three documents so that it would fit into one fifty-minute class period. Both tasks focus on whether to institute a tutoring center at the local high school or instead turn the school over to a private educational corporation.

- b. Describe the documents you included in the task. Why did you choose these specific documents?

Beyond the pages providing the scenario and the questions, the shortened three-document task included a graph showing a correlation between visits to a tutoring lab and low scores on end-of-grade tests, an article from an educational newsletter, and a group of abstracts on private education corporations, tutoring, and standardized test scores. I included the first one because I wanted to see whether the students understood the difference between correlation and causation. I included the second one because I wanted to see whether the students would notice that what was true in one type of city would not necessarily be true in a different type of city. I included the third one to give the students practice in drawing conclusions after sorting through apparently conflicting evidence.

- c. To what extent did a successful response to the performance task require students to integrate information and data in both narrative and quantitative forms? Explain.

The first question on the task prompted the students to consider whether the graph provided good evidence that tutoring was counterproductive. Accurately answering the question involved being able to understand the scatter graph in one of the documents. This was quantitative to the extent that it involved understanding the relationship between the marks on the graph and the numbers on its axes. Narration came into play at this point because the students needed to explain the meaning of the graph, or what it showed or didn't show. In effect, they had to explain their interpretation of the quantitative data.

The second question also blended the narrative and the quantitative. One of the abstracts in one document, for instance, mentions that the "improvement or lack of improvement was equally distributed among the three different private corporations" that took over the fifteen schools. By "doing the math," the students should have noticed that this meant that each private corporation had one school with significant improvement, two with marginal improvement, and two with no improvement or lower scores. From this quantitative data, students should have drawn the conclusion that this study did not provide good evidence to prefer any one of these private corporations over the other two.

3. Performance Task Administration

- a. When did you administer the performance task?

I administered the task on April 6, 2009.

- b. Was the student's score on the assessment calculated in the final grade? If yes, what weight did it have?

Yes, I made the task count 10% of the course grade. I did that so that the students would take the task seriously.

4. Student Performance

- a. Identify any consistent strengths you found in student performance.

The students were consistently good at focusing discussion by describing the view they were going to discuss before they started to discuss it. They were also consistently good at recognizing that what worked in one situation might not work in a different situation. For example, they pointed out that what worked in a wealthy, urban setting might not work in a poor, rural setting.

- b. Identify any consistent weaknesses you found in student performance.

Too many students did not seem to know how to read the graph. Too many students were willing to take evidence presented in documents "as is" or at face value instead of considering alternative viewpoints or alternative explanations. Students also often failed to state explicitly why something they had said was significant or mattered to the question at hand. Too often they did not make

their stance on the matter explicit. Finally in supporting their answers, students had a tendency not to cite specific details from the documents.

5. Recommendation and follow up

- a. Knowing that our students' performance on the CLA will be part of our institutional assessment, what will you will do in the courses you teach to address the skills and competencies assessed by the CLA?

I plan to make CLA-like assessments a standard part of my Philosophy 110 class. I will include it as part of the essay component in the course. Not only will that help students prepare for the CLA, it will also help them develop their skills in sorting through evidence, weighing it, and drawing reasonable conclusions from it.

- b. What recommendations would you offer for all faculty members?

I would recommend that all faculty members be involved in developing the skills assessed by the CLA. These skills include evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing evidence; drawing conclusions; considering alternative points of view; and communicating clearly. Such skills are important in daily life and in so many positions of responsibility and leadership in our society. Such skills are essential parts of what UNC-Tomorrow calls "global readiness." By helping students develop such skills, we help them become more competitive in today's global economy, and we help prepare them for successful living.

I would also recommend that faculty members creating CLA-like assignments take the time to develop a comprehensive grading rubric because it can make grading the task more manageable.

Finally, since the real CLA requires the students to type their answers into Word and then copy them into Blackboard, I recommend practicing this in classes as a way to help students prepare for the real CLA. I recommend this because last summer when my students completed a pilot CLA in a computer lab, many of them had trouble with saving, copying, and pasting.