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# Mixed Classes, Mixed Methods: Writing Students' Attitudes about Collaborative and Intercultural Learning

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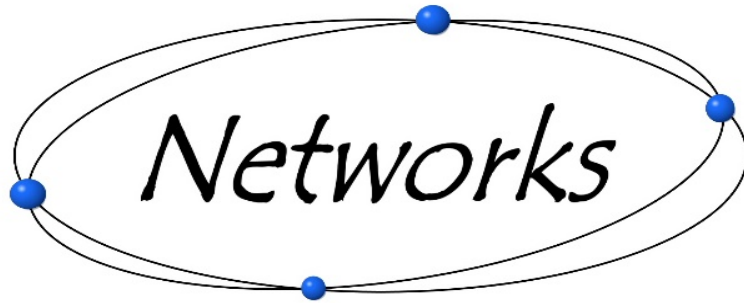
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# Mixed Classes, Mixed Methods: Writing Students' Attitudes about Collaborative and Intercultural Learning

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## Abstract

This article describes a two-semester study of mixed (native and non-native speaking) writing groups in developmental college writing classes. The teacher assigned and observed writing activities and collected survey and interview data to determine the impact on the students' perceived writing abilities and attitudes toward paired and small group work. The findings suggest that the benefits of collaborative learning are dependent on the degree of peer accountability and the teacher's care in designing the activities. With mixed language background English classes becoming the norm, teachers might consider the possibilities for collaborative learning as a means for providing further emersion for non-native speakers and opportunities for mentoring and intercultural learning for native speakers.

## Introduction

Whether through federal mandates such as Complete College America or state-level initiatives to slash higher education budgets, developmental education remains an area of ongoing debate and scrutiny by college governing boards, departments of education, and the national media. College and universities continue to wrestle with the competing priorities of reaching out to ethnic and socio-economically diverse student populations while maintaining high academic standards. In Georgia, changes in developmental education policies have led to a significant reduction in the number of students placed into developmental courses at state universities. The implications of these reductions have been significant. For example, at Kennesaw State University, because so few sections of basic writing were needed to accommodate the shrinking developmental English population and to ensure the sections would be filled, second language students would no longer be assigned to special ESL sections of the course, thus opening all sections to native and non-

native speakers. As the Learning Support English Coordinator, I began considering the pedagogical challenges and opportunities presented by these changes.

One observation made by faculty teaching in these newly mixed sections of developmental writing was limited interaction among students from differing cultural/linguistic backgrounds. Americans sat with Americans and international students sat with peers from their own countries or alone, rarely speaking to other classmates unless required to do so. As Tatum (2003) notes, this behavior is just human nature, not reflective of any hostility or disfavor towards otherness but our herding instinct to be among those with whom we feel most comfortable, those who look, talk, and act in the ways that we find most familiar. Of course, there has been debate among ESL theorists about which classes, mixed or homogenous, are more beneficial to second language learners. Those who have advocated for mixed classes cite a range of benefits, from the ESL students' ongoing immersion in the target language through class-related social interactions with native speakers to the realism that a mixed class provides as a representation of the contexts in which they will continue to learn in college and work in the future (Natov, 2001; Roy, 1984). Those who have been skeptical of the appropriateness of mixing native and non-native speakers in first-year writing classes suggest that doing so could add to the already significant discomfort and embarrassment of ESL students who might feel reticent among or intimidated by native speakers (Wachholz, 1997; Zhu, 2001). Since mixed classes would be the "new norm" for our program, I decided to conduct an iterative teacher research project with the goals of increasing student interaction and improving intercultural attitudes. This project's emphasis on collaborative and intercultural learning borrows from previous research on paired and group work in ESL and mixed writing courses (Aghbar & Mohammad, 1992; Cummins, 1995; Dreyer, 1990; Ibrahim & Penfold, 2006 ; Matsuda & Silva, 1999). The newly "mixed" developmental writing classes I was teaching seemed an appropriate setting for implementing the reflection and change that distinguishes action research from other forms of inquiry. Recognizing that each student, regardless of ethnicity or any other identifying characteristic, has something valuable to offer to his/her peers, this study examined the impact of paired and group work on the intercultural attitudes and feelings about collaborative learning among L1 and L2 (native and non-native English speaking) students enrolled in two sections of developmental writing.

# Methodology

Action Research (Freire, 1970; Lewin, 1946) was the methodology employed for this study (see Figure 1). I followed the PAR method (Planning/Acting/Reflecting) with the planning stage being my curriculum development and redevelopment (following the first iteration) and the action and reflection taking place through the teaching of the course, data collection and analysis, and adjustments made for the ensuing iterations.

Action research seeks not only to assess and improve the experience for students, but also for the instructor who is, through the action research cycle, refining pedagogy in a reflective process of teaching, data collection, and analysis, before starting the process all over again. In a writing class, action research might involve the introduction of some new pedagogy or curriculum enhancement, and determining, through data collection, repetition, and reflection, the degree of its impact over time, in line with the goals of the

implementation. My study introduced cultural course content and assignments requiring students to work in heterogeneous pairs, or groups, while I collected qualitative data: surveys, student and teacher reflections, participant interviews, and course artifacts (syllabi, assignment descriptions, and student work).
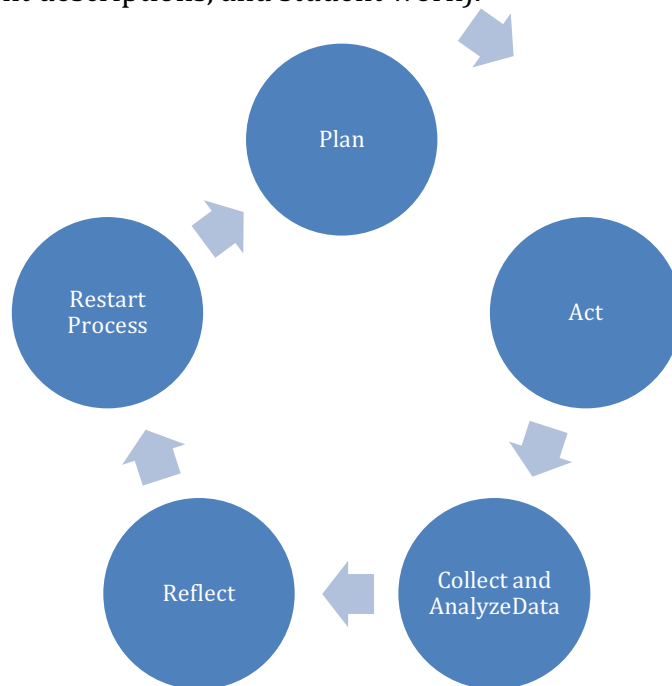


*Figure 1: Action Research Cycle*

In consecutive semesters of teaching our basic writing course, ENGL 0099/Writing for Academic Purposes, I assigned collaborative learning activities, observed students working in pairs and groups, collected reflection responses (and course artifacts), and had a colleague conduct interviews with students. Following the PAR method of planning, acting and reflecting, I was able to revise the course before starting the next cycle (semester) of teaching, data collection and reflection.

## The First Cycle: Spring 2011

The spring 2011 section of English 0099 enrolled fifteen students. Ten of these student identified English as their native language; the other five did not. The L2 students had recently come to the United States from Colombia, Haiti, Korea and Turkey. The first collaborative activity undertaken by the students was the Interview Essay. After reading, writing about and discussing in class Amy Tan's "The Language of Discretion," (2009) which chronicles the author's experiences transitioning between her home language (Chinese) and that of her adopted country (American English), the students were paired to interview one another about their own unique language histories. The pairs were chosen by me so that each student interviewed a classmate with a different native language or American English dialect than his or her own.

While in pairs, students read one another's written responses to the assigned reading in order to determine useful interview questions to ask their partners. Then, they conversed freely about aspects of the responses they found provocative with the goal of

finding a potential subject for their essays. By the end of the session, the students shared their concepts for their essays with the class, with me and their classmates offering suggestions to help clarify or narrow their topics. For homework, they were required to develop a set of five to ten interview questions that would help elicit enough information from their partners to outline and draft a full essay the following week. Based on my observation notes, the students appeared energized by the opportunity to break into pairs and talk. In some cases, social conversations crept into their discussions, but, overall, they seemed to stay on task, with the clearest evidence of this being the ease with which each explained their intended essay topics and plans.

The next class period, they interviewed one another, handwriting their partner's responses, which would be used in developing an outline to be brought to class for peer review the following day. After reviewing the outlines, the partners worked individually on their essay drafts during class then turned them in at the start of the next session; then, the students were asked to write freely and reflectively about their partners, the class, the teacher, and the assignment (see Figure 2).

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"Working with a partner has been beneficial [...] I have learned about my current partner's language/culture. He has actually encouraged me to learn a second language."

"He is very kind and great because when I didn't understand, he [was more] specific [and] translated to my language using Google."

"It was well thought out to create groups in class because it opens our mind and we feel more comfortable [sharing] our stories among ourselves."

"There [are] new points of view I didn't think about before conversations with my partner. My own story got a new perspective."

"It has been a very pleasant experience to work with my partner because we have some things in common about our first experience in a place where we meet coming from different places in the world."

---

*Figure 2: Student Feedback about Interview Essay (Spring 2011)*

The reflections indicated overall satisfaction with the partnerships and work process, with the only critical comment being made by one student who lamented not being able to include many of his or her "ideas and thoughts," just the partner's. I also commented on this in my observation notes, where I wrote that "several pairs seem to be struggling to provide lengthy responses to the questions asked, needing further prodding and follow-up questions." To address this problem, I decided to give them an extra day for interviewing in the fall iteration when they could first script then ask follow-up questions if they were unsatisfied with the feedback provided in the initial session.

## The Collaborative Collage Essay

Although the students continued to work in groups and pairs on occasion for peer review of outlines and essay drafts, I did not maintain observation notes or assign written

reflections until the eleventh week, when they started work on the Collaborative Collage, a shared essay project requiring them to work in mixed groups (at least one L1 and L2 student on each team of three or four), planning and composing an essay in response to a set of readings on "Working Lives" in their course reader, *One World, Many Cultures.* Over two weeks, the students met in and out of class working on their collage essays. Knowing it would be difficult, logistically, to observe all of the groups at length, I invited a colleague to observe the class as well during one of the group sessions.

On that first day of group work, closely following Peter Elbow's (1990) Collaborative Collage assignment, the students were placed into teams and shared what they considered to be the strongest parts of their own pre-written reading responses. A few problems immediately cropped up. One student who was absent the previous class period and two who were not did not have essays to share with their groups and were assigned to write while their teams moved forward. Perhaps even more worrisome was the fact that all but one group struggled with the directions which did not specify the role of each group member, an aspect of the assignment that ran counter to the prescription of clearly assigned roles suggested in much of the literature (Bruffee, 1984; Bryan, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The assignment sheet just suggested each student work with his or her own "strong parts" in crafting a single paragraph for the collective essay. However, when they started working together, it became apparent that their "strong parts," in coming from different parts of their essays, would not be easily negotiated into a coherent, group essay since the operation might result in four or five introductions, conclusions or body paragraphs. As the students struggled with their vaguely-defined roles and the apparently quixotic nature of the group composing process, I decided, mid-stream, to modify the assignment, interrupting the group work by stating that each team member should compose a paragraph *after* the teams agreed on an outline detailing what would go in each section of the essay. A colleague who observed that day's session charitably praised me, in her report, as being "responsive to [my] students and flexible." I was actually quite discouraged by the oversight and struggled to formulate a passable solution while looking competent doing so. The students appeared to respond graciously, seeming to take the changes in stride.

After two in and out-of-class planning and writing sessions, the students handed in their Collaborative Collage essays and composed brief reflections on their group work in response to the prompt: "Describe your feelings about working as a group on this assignment." Much of the feedback (see Figure 3) was consistent with my hopes for the project, that the students would see the advantages of peer-to-peer interaction not just for the purpose of improving their writing but to enhance their appreciation of culture.

> "It's helping me to become more patient with others of different cultures […] exposing someone with limited diversity to become more aware of new things."
>
> "If somebody doesn't understand anything in class, if he/she doesn't want to ask the teacher […] he/she can ask his group members for clarification."

> "I enjoy the group activities because not only we get to learn about one another, but also learn and understand each other's opinion."
>
> "All semester I have noticing the likeness other than the difference. That is because when I read their words that is what I notice; that we are more alike than different."
>
> "This process helps for us to think deeply and to listen carefully [to] other's opinion[s]."
>
> "While we discussed, there were disagreements of opinion, but we talked to each other. After that, we could choose one of the opinions that was best."
>
> "Working in a group motivated [me]. My team members supported me."
>
> "Our team was awesome. When we met out of class, we shared snacks. It removed our strain."
>
> "Everyone was very engaged and involved [...] my favorite paper by far. Learned about self and others, bonded with my fellow students."

*Figure 3: Representative Feedback about Collage Essay (Spring 2011)*

Not only did the comments reflect satisfaction with the assignment and group effort, they suggested, through terms such as "likenesses," "bonded," and "team," that the students forged productive relationships with diverse classmates. In fact, the sole interview we were able to schedule with a student from the class added more detail to this perceived success, with the student stating that the Collaborative Collage project was "nice because we have different values, customs, and foods. During the group meetings, we talked about things besides the assignment." However, the student did find the group essay writing to be a challenge, concluding that he would have preferred doing it himself. Other concerns were voiced in a few of the student reflections as well (see Figure 4).

> "I was very disappointed because some of our team members didn't take the work seriously. Some coming to class empty handed after a long weekend and trying to write something right then. Others claiming they forgot the work at home."
>
> "It would be helpful to have guidelines to follow or suggestions about how to conduct a group activity. I found myself looking back and reflecting on how we could have communicated better [...] because email didn't work."
>
> "I felt let down a times because students didn't show up [...] there was not email or phone call."

*Figure 4: Critical Feedback on Collaborative Collage (Spring 2011)*

Some of the frustration with absenteeism and tardiness I observed during the group sessions appears here in the student reflections. In her observation notes, my colleague wondered if I had any policy for lateness, particularly since I didn't appear to address it at all during her visit. Clearly, this needed to be acknowledged when reformulating the assignment for the fall term.

## Survey Comparison

In the first and final weeks of the semester, the students completed a survey of their attitude about intercultural and collaborative learning. Although the questionnaire used for this research provided a range of statements for which the students applied a rating of agreement from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree) the discussion of the results is restricted to items that showed the greatest variation from the pre to post-questionnaire averages. Where the mean response (average of students' ratings from 1 to 5) for most items showed the slightest change pre- to post-intervention (when an identical survey was conducted), diverging merely 0 to 2 percent, the averages for the items shown below in Table 1 decreased by more than 10% and address key aspects of the research questions themselves: class diversity and group learning.

*Table 1: Survey Results (Spring 2011)*

| Statement | Pre-survey Avg. (N=15) | Post-survey (N=11) |
|---|---|---|
| Classes with students from other countries are beneficial to my learning. | 4.53 | 3.91 |
| I believe group assignments are productive learning experiences. | 4.27 | 3.82 |

Students appeared to begin semester with greater confidence in the usefulness of mixed classes and group learning than at the conclusion of the term. This decrease in enthusiasm was seen in some of the student reflections, where they felt their teammates were not contributing equally and, in some cases, found the assignment to be lacking in the necessary structure for successful collaboration. Considering the positive feedback given following the Interview Essay, in terms of the students' appreciation for classroom ethnic diversity, it was surprising to see a decline in attitudes toward that very issue, as indicated in the drop in agreement to the first item in the table above (from 4.53 to 3.91). One explanation might be that although the students valued their interactions with students from other cultures, the academic impact was not as readily appreciable. Based on this and the other feedback provided in the reflection and survey responses, changes to the assignments were made for the upcoming iteration.

In an attempt to build on (and improve) the collaborative pedagogy being studied, for the fall term I extended the timeframe for the Interview Essay, giving more time for conversation throughout the pre-writing and drafting processes. As the students had noted in their comments, their essay content was restricted by the limited input from their partners. This view was corroborated one of my observation log entries: "Interview essays should involve more time working in pairs—especially after the first graded draft is

returned" (Observation Log, February 7, 2011). By extending the time dedicated to this project, I hoped to see more productive interactions between students and longer, more detailed essays since those collected in the spring averaged just one and one half pages in length.

I revised the Collaborative Collage assignment as well, providing better clarity and advice for delegating group member roles. The biggest change I made, however, was deciding not to grade the Collaborative Collage but require it as course participation only, in order to see if this would diminish any stress and disappointment that may have led to the negative feedback revealed through observation and student reflection.

# Cycle Two: Fall 2011

The fall section of English 0099 enrolled twenty-five students, with eight indicating English as their native language and seventeen indicating another language. The L2 students had recently come to the United States from India, Kenya, Korea, Pakistan, and Peru. Again, the first paired assignment was the Interview Essay. I hoped that the additional two days allotted for completing the assignment would lead to more productive conversations for each pair of students. As in spring, once they submitted their essays, I asked students to compose reflections on the Interview Essay, and much of the feedback was positive (see Figure 5).

"It was a good solid project, gave us some insight on another student that we might have not known about them. Very interesting and fun essay."

"The only thing that I can point out is that it gives you an interesting look at another person's life and culture […] a positive experience."

"The interview essay was fun because it was totally different [than] any other type of essay. It was good to write a story about someone [and] get their feedback on how well I did."

"This project was a positive to me. I learned a lot about my partner's culture which I had not known. She was very helpful with editing and making sure I have enough information to create a well [thought out] paper."

"I feel good about the interview essay project. It was good to know new things about new people and get to know more about different cultures."

*Figure 5: Sample Student Reflections on Interview Essay (Fall 2011)*

I observed the increased interaction mentioned in the reflection responses which can be attributable to the extended time allotted for the project. In my observations taken while they worked in pairs I made this entry:

> Their conversations seem so much more active this time. It's actually getting loud in here. They've jumped right in. Each pair is talking as if they've known each other for a while and are sincerely interested in what they have to say. At least that's the way it looks and sounds.

The increased interaction was reflected, as well, in the quality and length of the essays, which averaged nearly two pages in length (an increase of roughly 25%) and showed improved detail and coherence over those collected in the spring. This is not to say that all or even most students found the Interview Essay to be more productive this time, as some of the reflection responses critiqued various aspects of their interactions (see Figure 6).

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"I felt the interview essay was not something I'd want to do again. I like writing and usually have no trouble [but] my partner [had] no feedback or insight into my work."

"My partner wasn't a great help with detail and information, which was a bummer; however, I was able to put in my own creative part into the paper […] which was why I enjoyed it so much."

"Sometimes it was hard to actually write the paper due to the lack of depth given to me by the person I interviewed."

"I think the interview essay is good and bad. It's good because you can learn different things from different culture, however if your partner doesn't have anything to talk about then that would make it difficult for you."

---

*Figure 6: Critical Reflections on Interview Essay (Fall 2011)*

Even when given more time to work together, particularly during the revision stage, some students clearly grew frustrated with the limited editorial input from their peers, for even though I extended the amount of time the pairs had to interview one another and share essay drafts, students still complained of their partners being too reserved, limiting the potential content for their papers. This frustration with underperformance was addressed as well in the reflections written following the Collaborative Collage.

Accountability is often stressed in the literature about collaborative learning (Bryan, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1989), suggesting that such tasks must be organized so each group member has a distinct responsibility in the learning process. With the Collage Essay, I tried to make group member roles more clear while giving each group the leeway to determine which team member was best suited for the role appointed (outliner, writer, editor…). With some groups, as shown in select student reflections, the work was successfully delegated; however, for a few groups, this clearly was not the case, with a common theme being the lack of accountability on the part of certain group members (see Figure 7).

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"Some of the group members didn't show up for class and they didn't contribute anything to the essay."

"I had to do most of the work. My group wasn't prepared and two of my group members did not contribute a thing […] it wasn't a fun and all that great of an experience."

---

"However, when group members did not show up multiple times it made the process a lot harder."

"I know the teacher can't control a student's attendance, but this was my only negative point in the essay process."

"If your group members are lacking, not attending class on a regular basis and you end up doing all the work then grouping is not a great choice."

*Figure 7: Critical Student Reflections on Collage Essay (Fall 2011)*

If such comments only cropped up in five or six (of over 50) reflections, they could be attributed to just one or two underperforming students. However, these sentiments persisted over both semesters and were conveyed by more than a third of the student responses, though sometimes mixed with considerable positive feedback. Of course, as the instructor/observer, I too witnessed the drop-off in attendance during the Collage Essay sessions but can only speculate as to why this occurred: low motivation since the project would not be graded, shyness, and/or anxiousness about sharing ideas in small groups, particularly among L2 learners. Clearly several students experienced frustration with this and other aspects of the Collage Essay and, in similar ways, the Interview Essay.

Nevertheless, the student reflections and interviews do indicate that the collaborative work in English 0099 was successful, to a degree. As one student interviewed after the fall iteration noted, "I've been in the work force a number of years. If you don't work well with other people, you're not going to make it. It was a great exercise. The young guys and girls in there were not used to it. They got a lot out of it, and I still got a lot out of it." Though his was just one voice among many in this study, it does illustrate, from a student's perspective, the rationale for the intercultural and collaborative pedagogy adopted here.

## Survey Comparison

Data collection for fall 2011 began, again, with the administration of the survey used in spring. As with the spring iteration, the focus here is on survey items where a shift in attitude of 10% or greater can be adduced. This time, items showing the widest disparity from pre- to post-survey concerned the students' feelings about whether group work led to improved English skills and whether they preferred classes involving working in groups or pairs.

*Table 2: Survey Results (Fall 2011)*

| Statement | Pre-survey Avg. (N=23) | Post-survey (N=25) |
|---|---|---|
| Small group work can help me improve my English skills. | 3.83 | 3.48 |
| I prefer classes that don't involve working in groups or pairs. | 3.91 | 3.32 |

For nearly all of the items the average response in fall was lower on the pre-survey than in the spring, so this group started out slightly less enthusiastic about mixed classes and group work, particularly, as represented by their response to statement, "Small group work can help me improve my English skills." Since the primary focus of this research was attitude rather than skill enhancement, the average of the students' responses to the statement, "I prefer working in classes that *don't* involve working in groups or pairs," is worth noting as it suggests that the students found the group work somewhat more valuable this time around, as fewer agreed with this statement, thereby implying they *do* prefer classes which include group activities. This does, of course, contradict some of the student comments following the Collaborative Collage assignment, which indicated disappointment with their peers' efforts and accountability. However, their response to this survey item may be attributed to their appreciation for the Interview Essay, which the students, in their reflective writing, offered generally favorable, at times even glowing, responses.

# Discussion

Regardless of the students' language background, the benefits of intercultural and collaborative learning are well-documented in the literature (Agbar & Alam, 1992; Cummins, 1995; Matsuda & Silva, 1999) and, to some degree, in my research here. And as Learning Support English Coordinator, I am well positioned to influence how the developmental reading and writing courses are taught by the part-time faculty who teach most sections. In fact, most English 0099 faculty ask me for curricular input and often employ the same texts and assignments I do since they are already engaged, full-time, in high school teaching during the day and confide to me that they lack the time necessary to adequately construct a pedagogy for the developmental courses they teach in the evenings. The part-time faculty who teach during the day are also new to college teaching, often working for the first time outside the context of a graduate assistantship, and are all-too-happy to be given some guidelines from which to build a curriculum.

By continuing to observe students' paired and group interactions, as well as their work with culture-themed assignments, I have developed a richer understanding of the challenges of and necessity for continued intercultural learning. However, as the data from my study indicates, students appreciated the opportunity to work with others but were less certain of its academic benefits, which might have been expected, considering the high stakes exit requirements (Exit Essay and COMPASS Exam) for the course that must be accomplished individually rather than collaboratively.

In terms of what other researchers might take away from the findings of this study, I would hope they consider how the implications described here apply not just to classroom dynamics but to the need for broader curricular and programmatic change. As developmental education continues to undergo public, institutional and even governmental scrutiny, program directors might reconsider the impact of high-stakes exit requirements on curriculum development and classroom teaching, which can often be stunted by the need to focus on often reductive (sentence and paragraph-level) skills the students must demonstrate on standardized essay or multiple-choice exams, rather than the more sophisticated rhetorical abilities they will be expected to display in their general education and major coursework.

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