

English Composition (ENGL 1101) Course Redesign at Georgia Gwinnett College

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After scoring several hundred essays over 2 semesters, we concluded that moving to TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching) assignments. We spent the beginning of year two designing the evaluation essay through TILT, primarily using the layout of purpose, task, and grading criteria to shape different approaches to the assignment (evaluating a sci-fi film, evaluating a major, evaluating an online product). The general findings of the data collection showed a range of student writing abilities across all seven criteria, demonstrating that a broad change in ENGL 1101 was needed, not restructuring a single assignment or section of the assignment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Georgia Gwinnett College (a 4-year college that serves the most diverse population of students in the southeast) has a low-admissions standard and a unique body of students that struggle through their first year from a variety of obstacles: poor high school performance, low socioeconomic backgrounds, family demands, mental/physical disabilities, and general lack of preparation for college-level work. English 1101 Composition 1 (ENGL 1101) has a 60% pass rate average: students are not prepared for the rigors of college-level writing, students do not understand assignments in the course, and students do not value the work done in ENGL 1101 (learning to write on a college-level, critical thinking presented in written form, or academic research performed). Equability was a main feature of motivation for the redesign of ENGL 1101 because all incoming freshmen must pass the course as a prerequisite for the other required composition course, ENGL 1102, which is a prerequisite for other 1000-, 2000-level humanity courses. The impetus of this course is development of college-level writing and research with an emphasis on expository description and analysis. GGC follows Georgia's Board of Regents' regulations (that mandates students compose between 20-22 pages worth of writing cumulative), but individual instructors have freedom in assignments and pedagogical methodology in how they design, facilitate, and access the course work. Regulating equability in this course proved difficult because every instructor was trained at another academic institution and often followed traditions at their place of training and initially struggled to accommodate the specific needs of GGC students. TILT is designed intentionally

for disadvantaged, first-generation students as it explains to students the purpose for individual assignments, the sequence of steps to approach the task, and the criteria by which the assignment will be judged. For students across socioeconomic situations and varying levels of success in their education progression, TILT works well as an outreach with its accessible language, practical layout, and connection of course outcomes to student work. Research on TILT has shown improvement in retention even with only one assignment TILTed in a course. Intermediate goals included using ENGL 1101 as college prep for other courses, connecting assignments in the course to the course's outcomes stated explicitly in our college's catalog and syllabus, and offering faculty a wide array of possible assignments to use.

METHODS

Because equability was the goal, our methods in introducing and applying TILT was to recreate assignments that linked course outcomes to individual assignments. Because we do not have a standard course for ENGL 1101 past that of the outcomes and objectives for the course, many instructors have academic freedom in how they teach writing as process or as a skillset in ENGL 1101. Rather than trying to enforce a mandatory syllabus or implement an obligatory standard for the course such as a prescribed number of essays or determined topic for each assignment, we chose TILT because it allows for academic freedom within each course, allowing instructors to utilize their pedagogical strengths in how they approach writing and its instruction for incoming freshmen. The course redesign is not so much a prescriptive list of what faculty should and should not do in terms of the semester layout, but rather a guideline for assisting in presenting information to students that seems reliable and effective in utilizing the purpose of the course, explaining the steps to take to finish the assignment, and describing the criteria for which the assignment will be evaluated. We broached the change slowly and progressively: in Fall 2019, all G2C committee members developed one TILT assignments for their courses. In Spring 2020, all faculty teaching 1101 developed their own TILT assignments. The goal for Fall 2020 is to have two TILT assignments in all 1101 courses, and Spring 2021 aims to have all assignments in 1101 TILTed.

OUTCOMES

At the beginning of the G2C intervention, we decided to start the project by creating an assignment for an evaluation essay that would be given to students at the end of the semester, their last major assignment. In Fall 2018, all faculty teaching ENGL 1101 instructed students to write this essay at the end of the course, and faculty submitted random samples of this essay to the committee. In late Spring 2019 and Summer 2019, the committee scored 600 essays of evaluation to look for commonalities, problems, discrepancies, and general information as a baseline data collection. Reviewing all essays underneath a criteria rubric on a 5-point scale and then comparing fall 2018 data to Spring 2019 yielded no concrete results: students' ability to understand the assignment ran along the usual bell curve seen across college courses, students' writing ability also matched a standard bell curve in terms of skill-set demonstration, and all criteria scored tended to follow the same pattern with most of the students in the middle of the point system. After sharing the findings with the discipline, the committee decided to broaden its approach to include more general redesign objectives that would not target one particular assignment under a standard set of criteria but would allow instructors freedom in assigning work that best fit their pedagogical skills. Thus, TILT was implemented to be the major redesign of the course in which the change has happened in how assignments were presented to students, what assignments contained in giving information to students, and how students understood the grading criteria for assignments.

The outcomes for this change were resisted in the onset in several discipline meetings, but as faculty became more familiar with the TILT method and realize not only its implications but its accessibility (it's not hard to learn and some faculty were already using portions of it), the move to include TILTed instructions in one assignment in all of English 1101 became normalized. Other outcomes saw the discussion around assignments and methods used for English 1101 as disparaging from one course to another, and the need for equitability became even more obvious as faculty saw discrepancies in individual's TILT assignments. We posted assignments from the committee teaching Engl 1101 on our discipline's D2L page and then requested that all faculty teaching 1101 sent us their own TILTed assignment. We held two in-person sessions on TILT for English faculty, and the TILTed assignments came in from faculty, covering a range of assignments: description, narrative, analysis, visual argument, rhetorical proofs.

Several faculty members remarked on the feasibility of implementing TILT, mainly that arranging assignments through purpose, task steps, and grading criteria motivated them to redirect their attentions to assignments and make assignments more relevant to the teaching of writing as a process for current-day students. One faculty even noted that she assumed students understood the purpose of assignments but having to articulate it clearly helped her to envision students approaching the assignment, and she broke down the steps even more and saw students able to get started on the project immediately instead of asking bewildered questions about what they should do exactly.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

At the end of Spring 2020, our goals for the next academic year (regardless of whether we are teaching in person or online) reflect the need to implement TILT into GGC English courses from 1000 to 4000 levels. The first step will be bringing TILT into ENGL 1102 as that is the obvious choice for its implementation into courses designed around writing or literature and could be particularly effective in classes that study rhetoric and composition as methods of writing because TILT itself is a current method of pedagogy which has its own rhetorical implications. The goal of 1101 as the first course that students take in their college coursework aims for students to develop college-level writing which speaks to a variety of audiences for a variety of perspectives across multilingual, multimodal, and multinational contexts. The methods and skillsets developed for writing in English 1101 serve students throughout their academic years and into their chosen careers because writing has implications in all areas of human communication and professional endeavors. TILT ed assignments have students learn to look for purpose, tasks, and criteria, approaches that enable critical thinking in other classes to parse out important pieces of information for the completion of assignments and later in the performance of multifaceted tasks in their chosen careers.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

The lessons learned from this new approach to teaching have not accurately been recorded or tested because we are still in the initial stage of the changes. The switch to online learning in response to COVID-19 was another hurdle that we faced in normalizing the TILT approach, but as we moved to teaching the last 5 weeks of the semester online, the G2C committee encouraged English faculty to use and facilitate TILT in assignments as an effective online teaching method because it lets students see how the information is broken down into small steps that work towards overall progression in the completion of ENGL 1101.