

HUMANITIES UPDATE: 2011-12

Introduction

Last fall, the Board of Education of Evanston Township High School (ETHS) approved the redesign of biology with the understanding that a comprehensive evaluation plan would be developed and implemented for all of the humanities and biology restructuring with assistance from a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) comprised of external individuals from higher education. At the May 21, 2012 Board of Education meeting, the evaluation plan was outlined. The plan is comprehensive and long-term spanning five years. The Technical Advisory Group made it very clear that to determine impact we need to look at the effects of the program over students' high school experience. According to our experts, the earliest potential preliminary reporting will be 2013. With this understanding, the "Humanities Update" that is provided in this report is not summative. The data presented in this report are formative in nature and are being used to help inform implementation. This report is in two parts. Part I provides information gleaned from five sources: classroom observations; teacher focus groups and interviews; a student survey; student focus groups; and parent focus groups. Part II describes any curricular changes that will be implemented in humanities 2012-13 based on our experience in 2011-12.

PART I: WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Classroom Observations

In the fall of 2011, a classroom observation tool was developed to look at fidelity of implementation for the freshman humanities English and history classes. The observation tool was designed to systemically collect information about the consistency and accuracy of implementation of critical components of the humanities curriculum and instruction. Specifically, observation data was collected on the following

individual. The time constraint of only 30 minute observations limited the observer's ability to see all of the grouping strategies that were implemented within a full 42 minute class period.

What are teachers doing and saying?

Explicit and inferential questions

The observation tool was used to collect data on kinds of questions teachers pose. Explicit questions are straightforward more factual in nature and ask "right there" answers. In contrast, inferential questions are of a higher cognitive nature and ask students to combine prior knowledge or experience and apply critical thinking skills to answer a question. Both types of questions are important and serve instructional purposes. In the humanities courses English and history teachers ask both explicit and inferential questions of students to solicit their understanding of the topic being discussed. For seven percent of the English classrooms observed and 12 percent of the history classrooms observed, teachers only used explicit questioning. In all other classrooms, questioning was both explicit and inferential. Following is a sample of inferential questions that were asked:

English

- *Love is being compared to what?*
- *What do these dreams reveal about Romeo?*
- *What is he foreshadowing in those last few lines?*

History

- *How are these terms different?*
- *How do we know that a government is strong?*
- *What do you mean by larger and more complex empires?*

Following is a sample of explicit questions that were asked:

English

- *What is the rhyming format here? How many lines are in a sonnet?*
- *Can you give me an example of a poetic device?*
- *What does a good story have?*

History

- *How did the Black Death spread?*
- *What's a caravan? What's the Kabba?*
- *The word Islam means...? Which is not prohibited in Islam?*

Checking for evidence of understanding

In sixty-five percent (65%) of the history observations and 79% of the English observations, teachers checked for evidence of understanding in a purposeful way, including the use of *exit slips*², and formative assessments. As our observations only covered the first 30 minutes of a class period, the observers were unable to record any exit slips which are generally given at the end of the class period.

Differentiation in mode of presentation

While auditory, or lecturing, is the most commonly used mode of presentation by both English and history teachers, it is frequently coupled with visual presentations. History teachers used visual modes of presentations (such as document cameras to model ~~note-taking~~ PowerPoint slides) in 65 percent of the observations, and English teachers used visual modes 49 percent of the observations. Other modes of presentations used included computers (i.e., students used computers to do research), reading out loud, conducting performances, or presentations in class. In addition, English teachers used more than one mode of presentation in about 70 percent of the observations and history teachers used more than one mode of presentation in about 90 percent of the observations during a class period.

Table 1

Mode of Presentation	English	History
Visual	49%	65%
Auditory	70%	68%
Other	30%	28%

Student engagement

Classroom observations provide a snapshot of how many students were on task and participating during any given day and period. Students were considered to be off task and not participating if they were working on homework for a different class, holding side conversations, or doing something other than focusing and engaging in the class discussion. Through the observations, students were found to be engaged a majority of the time. Over 90 percent of the classroom observations in both English and history found at least 80 percent or more of the students to be on task and participating.

Table 2

% of Students on Task & Participating	% of English Observations	% of History Observations
90% or more students	79%	67%
80% or more students	93%	93%

In presentations or activities, very few connections were made between the English and history content. Connections between the two subjects were observed only 10 percent of the time. The data corroborate what both English and history teachers have said in focus groups about the need for more connections between the subjects.

What are students doing and saying?

Differentiation in approach to learning

Students are given the option to approach learning in different ways through content (i.e., choice of different assignments), process (i.e., different ways to take notes or analyze text), or product (i.e., different ways to report or present student work). It is important to note that it is not possible or pedagogically desirable to differentiate instruction 100 percent of the time.

Process. Students were given choice in the process they use to approach tasks in about 50 percent of the observations in both English and history.

Content. Differentiation in content was the most difficult to observe because it required observing the type of tasks that were assigned to see if students had choice within these assignments. The observers did not always have an opportunity to ask teachers about assignment given, especially if it was a task

assigned prior to the class period observed. For the five observed teachers handing out assignments, students had a choice in how they could approach it in 39 percent of the observations in English and 18 percent of the observations in history.

Product. When students made presentations reported out from their small group discussions, differentiation of the product was observed. Students were given flexibility in the type of presentation they could choose in about 49 percent of the English classrooms and 35 percent of the history classrooms.

Good instruction is complex and a blend of many strategies and approaches, and it is not possible or pedagogically desirable to differentiate instruction 100 percent of the time. It was difficult to observe differentiation in content because it required observing the assignments or tasks handed out to see if students had choice within these assignments. Future observations should try to capture the nature of assignments during the class period. If the observations incorporate the end of a class period, it will be easier to find an opportunity to ask teachers about a particular assignment.

Teacher Perspective

Two focus groups were held during the 2011-12 school year with the freshman humanities teachers. In the second quarter, eight English teachers participated in a focus group, and in the third quarter six history teachers participated in a focus group. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather feedback from teachers about the strengths and weaknesses of the new freshman humanities curriculum, the earned honors credit model, and any recommendations for improving the course.

In addition to these focus groups, during the fourth quarter American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted structured interviews with three English and three history teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to gather feedback from teachers on several constructs, including the academic rigor of the course, students' level of motivation, effective effort, and student supports. Some findings in these interviews were consistent with those from the focus groups, including the increased rigor of the course and the sense of community within the classroom. These interviews also provided more of an opportunity for teachers to comment on the level of student motivation and effective effort they saw within their classrooms. Following is a summary of the main points expressed across the focus groups and interviews.

Teacher focus groups

Strengths of the program. When asked about the strengths of the current humanities model, English teachers mentioned the flexible scheduling, the ability to team with their history partner, more opportunities to teach writing, and the opportunity for all students to access honors credit. History teachers commented they saw a difference this year in the rigor of the course compared to last year. Some of the teachers also discussed the development of students' sense of community within the classroom.

Areas for improvement. Teachers in both groups were asked what they felt could be improved in the current humanities course. English teachers discussed the complexities of the earned honors credit model, the grading system, and pressure to prepare students for assessments. Factors that contributed to this pressure were the limited amount of time they had available to plan, grade, meet with their partner, and meet with students. English teachers also expressed a need for a vertical alignment with subsequent courses in the English department, and in particular the structure of the sophomore year.

The discussion with the history teachers focused on the new World History For Us All (WHFUA) curriculum and recommendations for improving the course overall. Recommendations for improvement included narrowing the course content, better teaming with their English partners, rescaling the assessments, and rescaling the quarter project. Teachers felt there should be fewer assessments and that the assessments should be common across both the English and history departments. Overall, history teachers felt the earned honors credit assessment system was a good model, and discussed the possibility of adding more writing in collaboration with their English partners. Both groups discussed the possibility of improved teaming with their partners, and history teachers would like to have more opportunities for discussions on how to better integrate the two courses.

Teacher interviews

Student motivation. Teachers cited a number of factors that motivate students, including grades, interesting material, parental expectations, the prospect of college, and choice in assignment.

Effective effort. Teachers agreed that while most students want to be successful, there is a mix in terms of work ethic. Teachers pointed out that freshmen are 14-year-olds, who are “on it some days and some days they’re going to be off.”

Academic rigor. According to teachers, most students were meeting course objectives with some scaffolding in place to help them succeed. Teachers identified students who need extra reading help as a group that needs particular support with the curriculum.

Student support. Teachers acknowledged that many students do not take advantage of the structure T Ob(stude.535e

Student Survey Results

ETHS freshmen were surveyed in spring 2012 about their experiences in their humanities classes. Students were asked to use a scale of 1 to 5 to indicate level of agreement with several statements, as well as rate the amount of effort put forth or amount of improvement made in a variety of areas. The results below report student responses with a rating of 4 or 5.

Effort & Motivation Overall

Figure 1

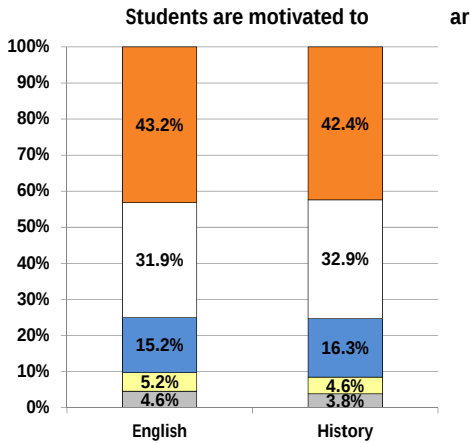


Figure 2

- 75% of the freshmen feel they are motivated to do well in their English and history classes.
- At least two-thirds of the freshmen report putting a lot of effort into their English (69%) and history (65%) classes.

Effort & Motivation to Earn Honors Credit

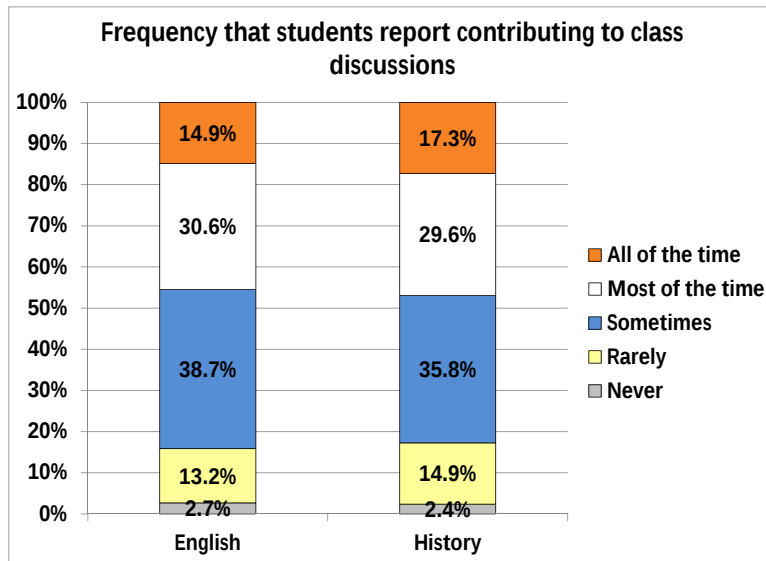
Figure 3

Figure 4

- 75% of the freshmen also report being motivated to earn honors credit in English and history.
- About two-thirds of the freshmen report putting a lot of effort into earning honors credit in English (67%) and history (64%).

Effort Put Into and Difficulty of Benchmark Assessments	
Figure 5	Figure 6

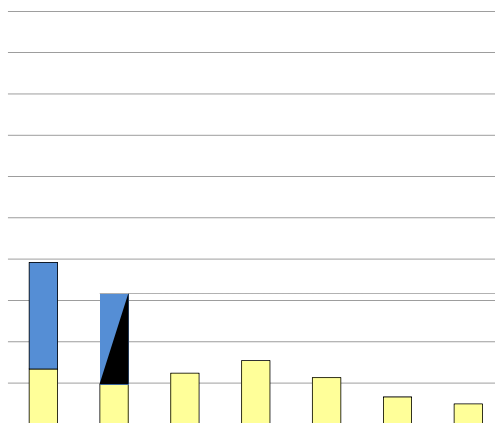
Figure 9



- Nearly one half of the students reported contributing to their English and history class discussions most or all of the time.

Skill Development

Figure 10



- Nearly 80% of students believed their humanities classes helped them improve in writing and research.

Rigor

Figure 11

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Students were also asked to comment on several open-ended questions, including what they felt were the strengths of their humanities classes, what they would change, what kind of help they should have to make them more successful, as well as any other

Teachers feel that the earned honors assessment model is complex. A concern of English teachers is the lack of time they have to grade, plan, meet with partner, and meet with students. The teachers feel

Part II: WHAT IS CHANGING FOR NEXT YEAR?

Assessments for Earned Honors Credit

Next year our core model will remain the same to earn honors credit. To earn honors credit for a semester students will continue to do all of the following:

- Earn 320 of the possible 400 points on the earned honors credit assessments,
- Earn a C or higher on the semester exam, and
- Earn a C or higher for the semester.

We remain committed to the continuous improvement of the freshman humanities model. We also remain committed to developing clear pathways to advanced work. Now that we have completed a year of implementation it is time to refine and enhance our work. The modifications outlined below are informed by teacher and student feedback.

Based on student and teacher feedback, the reading competency assessment for earned honors credit will become a diagnostic assessment given at the start of the school year. This will allow teachers to utilize it as a formative tool to differentiate instruction. A process paper will replace the reading competency assessment for earned honors credit.

The most significant change to the earned honors credit assessments is in response to the need for more shared curricular experiences. Currently humanities teachers collaborate on four research projects. Next year, in addition to the research projects, humanities teams will have combined writing prompts on the semester exams and a combined English and history demand writing earned honors assessment first semester. These combined assessments will further solidify the English and history partnerships and build more direct connections into the humanities curriculum. Similar to last year students will complete 11 writing assessments towards earning honors credit.

Next year, the quarter projects will be renamed research assessments. This will help to clearly communicate to students the focus of this particular type of earned honors assessment. There will continue to be four research assessments during the course of the year.

Teachers agree to expand the feedback on the assessment for earned honors credit. This includes more formative feedback and summative feedback to students throughout the school year.

Table 4
Assessments for Earned Honors Credit 2012-13

1 st Semester	
English	History
Research 1	
Research 2	
Free Response Process	Free Response On Demand
Combined Writing On Demand	
2 nd Semester	
English	History
Analytic Paper 1	DBQ Matrix
Research 3	
Analytic Paper 2	DBQ
Research 4	

Working Together

Teachers expressed a need for time to work together. Next school year, during Professional Development Mondays, teachers will work on curriculum, assessments, and instruction. They will continue to have a dedicated professional learning community to examine assessments and curriculum. In addition, there will be a professional development period dedicated to humanities. During this time, teachers will focus on differentiating instruction and students who struggle. They will also share ideas for lessons and discuss engaging instructional approaches designed to get our most vulnerable students on track for success.

Professional Development

A cadre of humanities teachers will participate in Path training this summer. Path training is through Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). This training focuses on implementing writing, . ITw [d to04 Tc 18adre or mAVIiWlHsVliWla9Tc .0006 Tw [(teachers)cimplcng P9.40 .4will