

5.3.4 The Writing Zone Workshops, an Innovative Project

According to data from the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, the students in the system are not reaching adequate level of performance in the standardized tests. From year 2008 to 2016 only 39% of eleventh grade students reached levels of proficient or advanced in the Spanish test (http://www.de.gobierno.pr/files/PPT_RESULTADOS_METAPR_2016.pdf). That is, close to 61% of the students are entering universities without adequate skills in the Spanish subject, which represents a challenge to the university.

The Writing Zone Workshops (WZW) came forth as a need to reinforce candidates' writing skills in Spanish. It was necessary to increase their writing skills for them to adequately answer the Teacher Certification Exam (PCMAS). This exam required writing skills as a means to approve some of its sections.

The WZW was developed by the Coordinator, Dr. Jorge Cruz Velázquez, Professor of Spanish Curriculum, of the Department of Graduate Programs, in collaboration with the Campus level assessment Coordinator Professor Julio Rodriguez. The rubric was developed based on the assessment criteria of the College Board of Puerto Rico and Latin America for the essay that is part of the Teacher Certification Exam Fundamental Knowledge and Writing Skills component, and the essay that is part of the Teacher Certification Exam for assessing professional and pedagogical knowledge of the candidates. The rubric was used during the writing skills workshops that are required as part of the Methods or Pre Practicum courses starting in 2009 with the revised baccalaureate programs. At the beginning the participants participated in 14 hours of workshop and tutoring offered by graduate teaching assistants selected for their preparation and knowledge of writing, who are trained and supervised by Dr. Cruz, and who also assess candidates' essays using the rubrics. The rubric was explained to the candidates at the beginning of the workshop and uses them to evaluate their own work. The graduate assistants assessed candidate writing and provide feedback through a formative process. At the end of the workshops, final essays are scored with the same rubric. Later, the workshops offered to the candidates were adjusted to 10 workshops and continued to be supervised by graduate students and / or teachers in the Spanish area.

One transformation generated, based on the data collected in the WZW, is related to attendance. The original intention was that all of the students who participated in the Pre Practicum course would attend WZW. However, it did not happen this way, since the Pre Practicum did not stipulate WZW as a requisite for the candidates, instead it was a recommendation made by the professor. The candidate attended only if they had interest in improving their writing. The following table shows the participation of the students in WZW in four semesters. The participation was less than 50% of the students expected to attend that is, taking the Pre Practicum.

With the purpose of increasing candidates' participation, starting the first semester of 2016-2017, the WZW is a requisite for course FAED 4002, which is mandatory for all the

students. Progressively, all the students will take WZW when it becomes a requisite in FAED 4001 and FAED 4003. In this manner, the EPP will assure that all the students participate in WZW and have an opportunity to improve their writing skills.

In terms of the grades in WZW, the table presents that the average were within the range of 3.04 and 3.46; which shows that, in general, the candidates obtained good grades. In three semesters, more than 81% approved the WZW; the lowest semester was the first semester 2015-2016 with a 62%.

	2014-2015 1st semester	2014-2015 2nd semester	2015-2016 1st semester	2015-2016 2nd semester
Candidates in WZW	67	64	65	52
Average based on a 4 points scale	3.46	3.42	3.04	3.30
Candidates who approved	85%	84%	62%	81%