

Digital Course Solution Improves Student Success and Increases Instructor Efficiency

Dr. Lynda Haas, Associate Director of Composition and Course Director at the University of California, needed a way to standardize the department's grammar and language instruction. She chose *Connect Composition* as a framework to help facilitate this initiative. Today, Dr. Haas uses *Connect* as the course shell she prepares for 100 instructors and teaching assistants across the campus. As a result, students show improvement on every rubric measure.

Institution Profile

Part of the vast University of California System, the University of California at Irvine enrolls more than 20,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students per year. It is among the fastest growing of all of the University of California campuses.

Implementation

Course Description:

Writing 39B, Critical Reading and Rhetoric, is the first of two required lower-division writing courses at UCI. It may be taken as a pass/fail course unless an academic department requires that it be taken for a letter grade.

Course Grade:

- 25% of the final grade is based on Class-Community: Reading, Discussing and Writing-to-Learn
- 25% of the final grade is based on Critical Reading Assignments
- 25% of the final grade is based on Rhetorical Analysis Essay
- 25% of the final grade is based on Rhetoric-in-Practice Project

Digital Product in Use:

Connect® Composition

Course Name:

Critical Reading and Rhetoric

Course Types:

Face-to-face, hybrid and online

Credit Hours:

1-6

Textbook in Use:

The McGraw-Hill Handbook, by Maimon, 2e

Instructor Name:

Dr. Lynda Haas

Enrollment:

115/year (instructor total)
4,000-4,500/year (university total)

Case Study Term:

Spring 2011

“The beauty of *Connect* is that it is extremely flexible so that you can use it in the way that best fits your pedagogical situation. You can use it to have students review grammar and language topics so you don't have to spend as much class time discussing them, and you can also use it to help students learn the process of writing essays and rhetorical situations.”

- Dr. Lynda Haas

Implementation of McGraw-Hill *Connect*

With 80% of UCI students coming from multi-lingual households, an external review of the writing program recommended that all grammar and language instruction be standardized. Dr. Haas' responsibility was to build the required course shell for the department's 100 instructors and TAs across the campus. She incorporated *Connect Composition Plus*, which includes *The McGraw-Hill Handbook* eBook, to help address all of the standard WPA learning outcomes that provide a framework for the course.

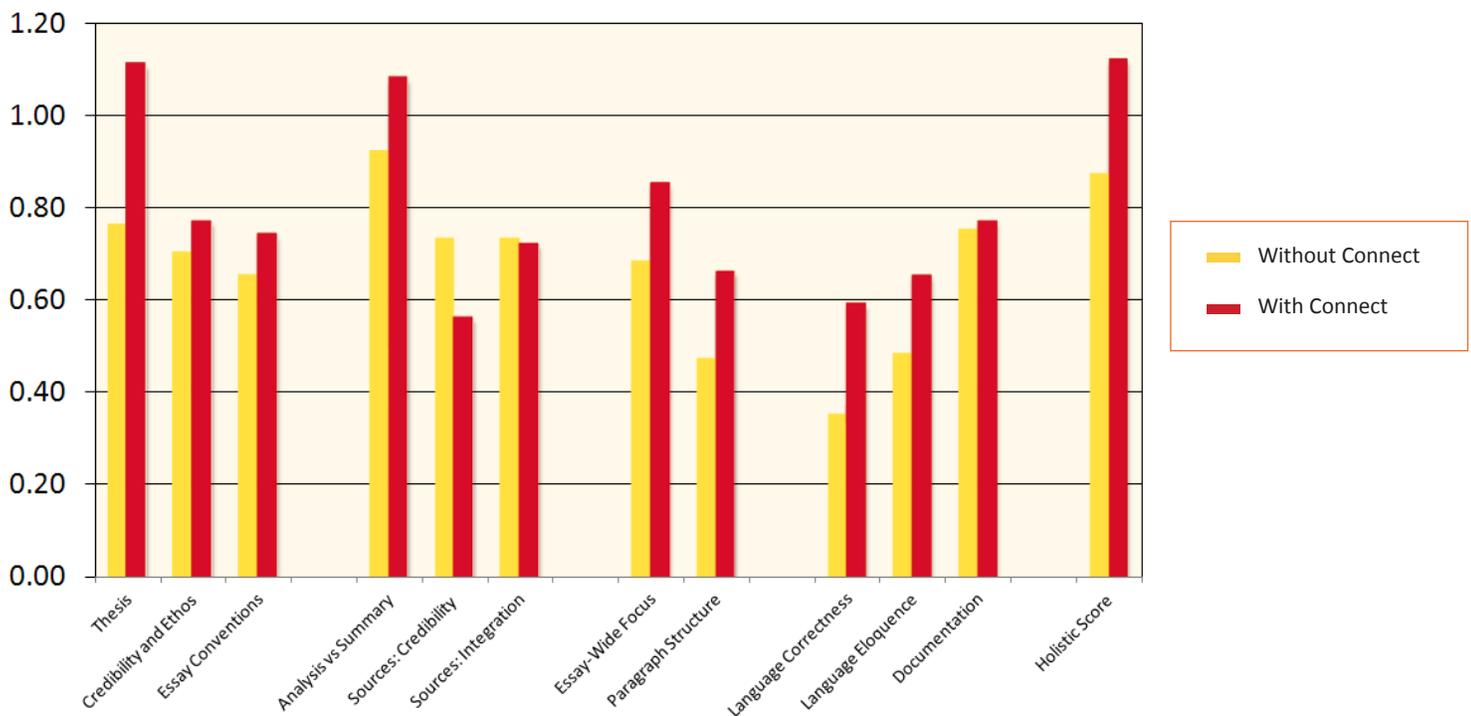
Although the primary purpose of integrating *Connect Composition* into the course was to assist students with language conventions, grammar and usage, and MLA conventions, Dr. Haas' course shell also requires students to read the on-line handbook, such as the writing process sections, which helps students develop stronger introductions, conclusions, transitions, and coherent paragraphs. The course also requires students to access the *Connect* sections on creating an effective visual presentation (PPT) and giving an oral presentation, both required assignments in the course.

At the beginning of each term, students take the *Connect* diagnostic test and complete the resulting individualized editing skills learning plan at their own pace. A review of one or two content areas each week, followed by a post-test, is required. The post-test grades become part of the student's overall grade in the course.

Weekly assignments require students to review, on average, seven or eight pages from the eBook, view an associated animation, and complete the post-test on a topic to be covered in class. *Connect Composition* is also used during class time for revision and peer review activities. For example, an instructor may review a page of content, or ask students to complete an exercise, and then use that as a framework for the peer review work to be done that day.

In addition, the course shell uses the Outcomes Assessment feature in *Connect* to grade diagnostic essays and final essays using a rubric that was customized specifically for the course. Instructors use the resulting scores to determine where students need help the most. At the end of the term, Dr. Haas and her colleagues use the scores to compare the overall progress students made in each rubric area.

Figure 1 - Student Growth Rates by Outcome

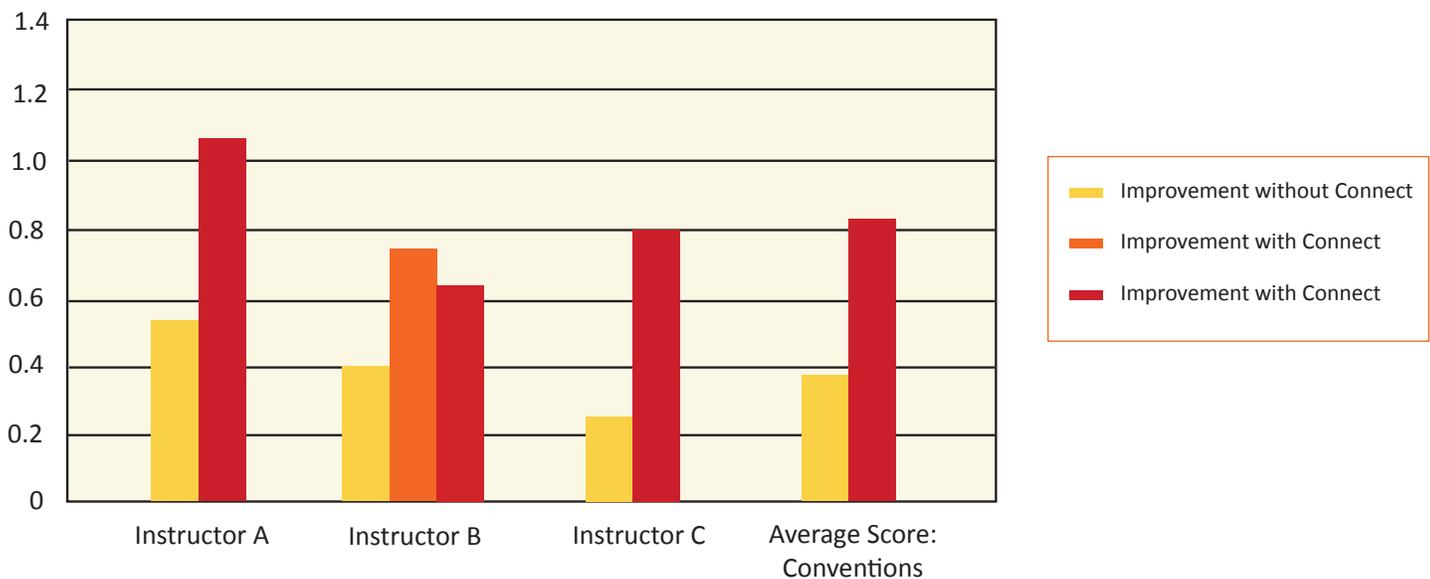


Results Achieved

In Spring 2011, Dr. Haas conducted a study using *Connect Composition* that involved 250 students. Overall, students experienced greater gains on their scores when using *Connect* (see Figure 1). In addition, Haas reports that the use of *Connect* had an “equalizing” impact on students’ scores. The students who had *Connect* had more parallel scores and increases, while students in the sections without *Connect* were all over the board.

Instructors reported that using *Connect* freed up class time that would otherwise have been spent reviewing language and grammar issues. Instead, students work on these issues within *Connect*. “*Connect* has definitely cut down the time spent responding to language and grammar concerns, because instructors can just refer students to sections in *Connect*,” she says. “Grammar and usage reviews are in the background of the class and can be addressed in class time only when needed.” Instructors also save time by posting the students’ weekly post-test grades to their online gradebooks, ensuring continuous improvement by making students instantly aware of content areas that need further review.

Figure 2 - Southern California Outcomes Research in English (SCORE) - Growth Rates for Grammar & Usage by Section

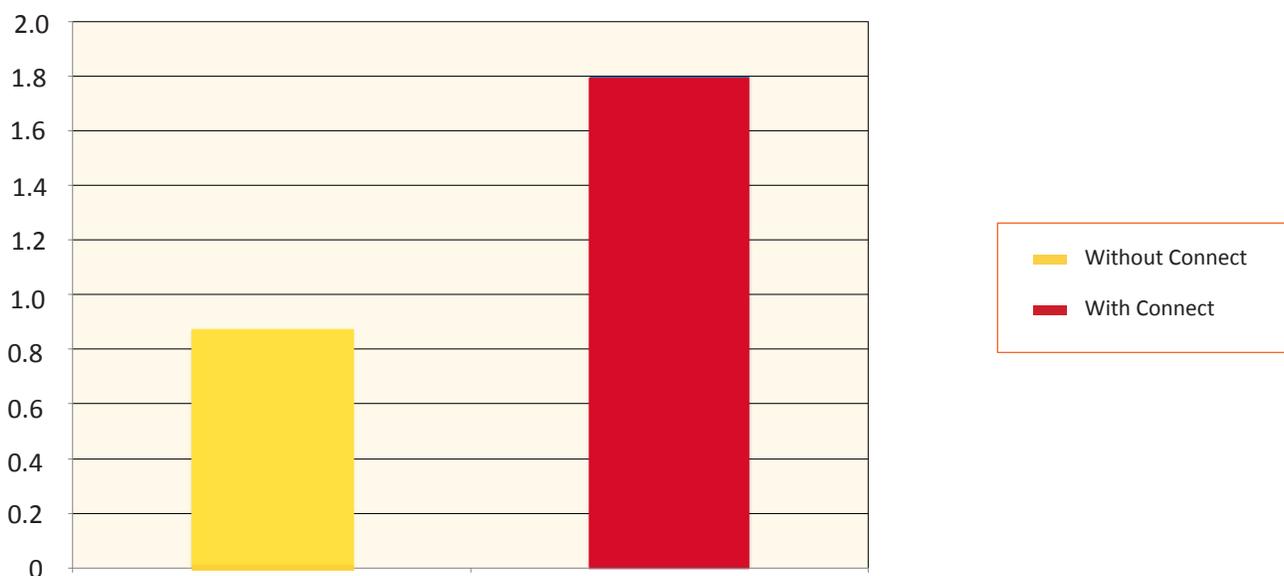


Dr. Haas’s strategy of using *Connect Composition* for “passive instruction” (involving little or no actual class time) to help students overcome problems with language and grammar has been a definite boon for UCI students. She says, “Students who are in the basic writing classes, who need much more hand-holding on grammar and usage issues, love *Connect* and rave about it in their reflective blogs. Students who are a bit further along appreciate the ability to review the concepts. I’ve learned that it’s really best to use the system differently for different skill levels.”

UCI instructors who taught the course both with and without *Connect Composition* saw that students who used *Connect* had significant gains in skills in grammar and usage conventions (see Figure 2). Each class experienced greater improvements with the use of *Connect*, with an average increase of .82 in skill scores in grammar and usage conventions, versus only .39 without *Connect*. All essays were assessed by third party readers.

Interestingly, Haas found that *Connect* had a significant impact on those students who scored the lowest on the first essay. Students with the lowest scores experienced greater acceleration in growth on their second essay while using *Connect*, increasing their score by 1.8 versus .87 for those not using *Connect* (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Growth Rates for Holistic Scores Among Lowest Performing Students



The use of *Connect* has also increased student engagement in peer review sessions. Students now bring in the information they have gleaned from their work in *Connect* and use it to review their fellow students' work. Haas also observes that many students say they are happy to have done a weekly review in grammar, language, and usage issues, because they forgot some of what they had learned in high school, and they are aware that writing according to the conventions of standard English is important for their future careers.

UCI students are also pleased with the cost of *Connect*. Haas says, "We don't use the print version of the textbook, so it saves our students money for books. We recently had a push in the department to lower the cost to students for books, so we were able to cite our use of *Connect* as doing our part." Overall, students report high levels of satisfaction with *Connect*. Of 200 survey respondents, 75.5% rated the diagnostic test and individualized learning plan as helpful. 80.5% of students found the Outcomes-Based Assessment helpful as it allowed them to see the strengths and weaknesses more clearly in their writing. In addition, 82.1% of students found *Connect's* peer review tools "helpful and easy to use," and 90.8% of all students found the interactive eBook useful. According to Dr. Haas, "Students appreciate it, perhaps comforted by the routine of the weekly *Connect* reading and post-test assignments."

Conclusion

According to Dr. Haas, "The majority of instructors at UCI who use *Connect Composition* in their classes believe that it has improved their students' writing." The success that instructors and students have had with *Connect* has led to its implementation in fully online classes at UCI. The department has also created a new class, Hum29, with *Connect* at the center, serving as a two-hour online "helper" class for students in composition courses with extensive ESL issues. In the future, the department plans to require students in all Writing 39B sections - about 70 - to complete both the diagnostic and the final essay within *Connect Composition*. The rubric and related *Connect* reports will give Haas's department empirical data on student progress in every class offered for the very first time.