



Background

Writing center and composition scholarship emphasizes the importance of focusing on higher-order concerns in writing. However, there is a lack of recent scholarship that examines how instructors perceive student writing.

Early scholars have examined the negative effects of focusing primarily on lower-order concerns, classifying them as problems of “performance, or fluency, not of competence” (Bartholomae, 1980, p. 263).

In his seminal article, “The Phenomenology of Error,” composition scholar Joseph Williams (1981) described the difference between higher-order concerns and lower-order concerns as “the difference between reading for typographical errors and reading for content” (p. 154). He argued that instructors read student work more critically than they do the work of their peers, often actively searching for errors in student writing and, thereby, find more errors overall (p. 159).

Other composition scholars, such as Russell Tabbert (1984), said that attention to grammatical errors can distract from content and does little to promote “true literacy” (p. 42). Within the last thirty years, however, data-driven research into higher and lower-order concerns is lacking.

Research Questions

To what extent do instructors take grammatical concerns into consideration when assessing student writing?

What is the relationship between what instructors believe about their grading habits and the way they actually grade student writing?

What forms of instructor feedback on student writing are the most common, and what trends can we see?

Methodology

After gaining IRB approval in the summer, we began recruiting instructor participants in the Fall of 2017 from a variety of disciplines from UW-Eau Claire. Our goal was to recruit at least 20 instructor participants, but only ended up with 11. We focused on instructors who typically teach at least one 100-level course that involves evaluating student writing in some capacity (e.g., papers, essay questions on exams, in-class writing, reflections, reader responses).

After scheduling times to meet with the participants, one researcher went to their office to deliver one of the two sample papers we created. One paper contained a multitude of lower-order concern errors, while the other was grammatically correct. We asked participants to read the paper while making annotations along the way. When they finished, they were to give the paper a grade based on their own grading methods. The participants placed their paper in an unmarked folder, with the only identification being a randomized code that linked the paper to the post-survey that was sent after the meeting.

Once the researcher left, the participant received an email containing a link to a Qualtrics survey. This survey contained questions about how the participant believed they graded and annotated the paper. In other words, do they believe they paid more or less attention to grammatical errors and lower-order concerns compared to the higher-order concerns.

These papers were then coded by the researchers and compared to the surveys.

Results

Though 17 faculty members agreed to participate, only 11 submissions were completed, resulting in an inadequate number of participants.

Due to the low number of recorded responses from participants, no valid conclusions could be interpreted from the data set.

Discussion

This project did not meet the desired outcome or answer the research questions. Future researchers would have to develop new strategies to craft a more valid research project. Future research in this area might consider alternative approaches to contacting faculty to obtain a suitable sample size. It is possible email was not the most reliable way to invite faculty to participate in the study.

We also considered the time the emails were sent during the semester. Future researchers might consider sending the invitations at a more strategic time. There was also a month delay between people agreeing to volunteer and when we began to collect our data.

We also considered sending reminders to participants, as some forgot about their appointments or participation.

Works Cited

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