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Abstract

This essay describes how a team of faculty members and undergraduate students worked together to investigate key questions about the experiences students at our campus face as they transition from high school to college. We describe the process we employed in starting our project, and we draw some conclusions about the unexpected positive outcomes of our SoTL student-faculty partnership.

Keywords

Student-faculty, Collaboration, Program research

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Necessity and the Unexpected: SoTL Student-Faculty Collaboration in Writing Program Research

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Abstract

This essay describes how a team of faculty members and undergraduate students worked together to investigate key questions about the experiences students at our campus face as they transition from high school to college. We describe the process we employed in starting our project, and we draw some conclusions about the unexpected positive outcomes of our SoTL student-faculty partnership.

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Introduction

“Our students aren’t reading books!” “What are they writing in high school?” In the hallways and in meetings, we frequently hear these types of frustrated comments and questions. Often colleagues across our university look to composition instructors for the answer. Within our own university’s writing program, however, we found that many instructors were primarily working with anecdotal lore about our students’ literacy experiences. In the absence of more rigorously-collected evidence, we have worked from these beliefs and assumptions as we decided what to teach and how. Clearly, having more reliable data about our students’ experiences in reading and writing would improve our ability to answer colleagues’ questions and, more importantly, our ability to help students improve their reading and writing practices. We needed more information, and we needed to turn to our students for answers.

In the spring of 2011, we had the opportunity to develop an empirical study about our students’ literacy experiences. An internal grant from our provost’s office invigorated us to form a research team composed of two faculty members, Kathryn and Collie, and two undergraduate students, Marisha and Nia. Collaboration between faculty and undergraduate student co-researchers made sense to us because our goal was to increase faculty members’ understanding of our students’ experiences. Who better to work on such a research project than students themselves? Collie and Kathryn regularly taught first-year composition; Marisha and Nia had both recently taken those classes. Our goal at that time was to gather data to help us understand the successes and difficulties that our first-year students experience during the transition from high school to college writing. We wanted to

learn both what factors help students thrive in their new literacy environments and which contribute to student attrition from our writing courses. We hoped to use that information to re-envision the first-year composition classes at our university.

Although each of us came to the study as advocates for student-faculty research partnerships, none of us had ever engaged in a project of this scale. The faculty members were conversant with the literature on student voices in the scholarship of teaching and learning but were new to the process. The students had never been presented with the opportunity to work with faculty researchers. Naturally, there were obstacles, and this article will describe some of the necessary constraints and resulting difficulties we encountered. By the end of the project, however, each of us found that this student-faculty collaboration yielded unexpectedly promising gains that extended beyond the gathering of vital information for our writing program.

Studies That Inspired Us

We are by no means the first to engage in this process of working with students on questions of course development. Recent scholarship advocates that student involvement in the scholarship of teaching and learning is not only a valuable add-on; it is necessary for anyone who wishes to understand the learner's perspective (Werder, 2010). Indeed, when it comes to questions of course evaluation and design, Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) have recently insisted that "academic staff should not only consult students but also explore ways for students to become full participants in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula" (p. 133). Huber and Hutchings (2005) have advocated for the role of students in discussions about how learning happens. Looking at our own discipline, we have found further suggestions that we must hear what students have to say. Salvatori and Donahue (2009) noted that recent scholarship in composition has lost focus on student writing for many reasons, yet they would like to see a renewed focus on the student. What they suggest is more scholarship of teaching and learning in the field of composition studies. We take their call to its next logical extension by applying the model of student voices in SoTL to composition questions, thus firmly placing students back at the center of the discussion by involving them as our research partners.

When we began the project, we looked to others who had engaged in student-faculty SoTL collaborations for models (Mihans, Long, & Felten 2008; Mulligan, 2011; Hornsby & Simkins, 2011). We found much inspiration in Werder & Otis's (2010) collection and in Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten (2011) as well as the Lilly conference presentations in 2010 and 2011 made by students and faculty co-investigators at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (Hornsby et al, 2010; Hornsby et al, 2011). Most of the studies we were familiar with seemed ambitious, with long range goals and strong institutional support. We found that we aligned ourselves with the values evident in this emerging scholarship on student voices in SoTL, yet we knew that the short time frame of our grant and the constraints of our teaching and administrative workloads meant that our project would have to take a different approach.

Opportunities and Obstacles

At the midpoint of a hectic semester, our provost's office announced an internal grant opportunity that seemed to match our interests. We were especially pleased to see that these "Faculty-Student" grants were targeted for projects that involved students and faculty

as partners. Furthermore, the funders specifically indicated willingness to use money for student stipends. This would assure that we could pay co-investigators for their labors. The timeframe for the completion of a funded study seemed tight, but since our dean strongly encouraged members of the College of Liberal Arts to apply, we wrote a proposal.

The project was on a very tight schedule from the start. Our proposal was due in February, we learned about our grant in March, and, according to the terms of the grant, it would have to be completed by July. This timeframe meant that we needed to finish our work by the beginning of May in order to administer student surveys they left for summer. Our final report was due to the provost's office by July 1.

In essence, we had three months to work on our project from start to finish, and those three months (March through May) are undeniably hectic ones for any student or faculty member. Kathryn was teaching four fully-enrolled classes, while Collie was teaching courses and directing the first-year writing program. Marisha and Nia were also working on the project outside of their full-time studies. Would we have liked a longer lead-in and a more contemplative pace? Of course. Nevertheless, we were able to accomplish much during this compressed period, and we believe that our jump-started student-faculty SoTL project opened the door for more such partnerships within our own department and perhaps across our university.

Background for the Project

Our research focused on the way our entering students were handling the transition from high school to college writing. Our department is responsible for offering introductory composition courses for entering students. Collie and Kathryn regularly teach these classes. As the director of our first-year writing program, Collie has additional responsibilities to consider the course in terms of our General Education Curriculum. We wanted a way to assess whether we were doing enough to help our students make that important transition from the reading and writing done in high school to the literacies expected in college courses.

As we interacted daily with this student population in our classes, we could see on a case-by-case basis where our own efforts resulted in successes and failures. We also discussed our classes frequently with our fellow composition instructors in the hallways and at meetings. More than once we had heard faculty members make a particular claim about reading practices: "Our students haven't necessarily read any full-length books in their last year of high school, and if we don't assign them, they might not read any their freshman year." Was that true? If so, we found that to be disturbing and interesting. Many instructors also had anecdotal evidence that our students were sometimes not asked to write an essay during their entire senior year of high school. If that were true, that suggested a steep learning curve as they entered our writing classes. But we needed to base curricular and pedagogical decisions on evidence, not assumptions. We needed students to help us understand what they brought with them from high school and how they were experiencing the transition into college writing classes.

We felt invested in seeking answers because we knew it would be useful to students, faculty, and administrators. We wanted to hear how students felt about their experiences, and we knew from personal interactions with students that they wanted to be heard. Administrators were and continue to be interested in related issues as well. Our university recently established a campus-wide initiative "to enhance NCCU students' oral and written

communication skills” (North Carolina Central University, 2011). In order to position students for success when they leave college, our campus firmly asserts that they need to become strong communicators while in school. To provide appropriate instruction for them to reach that goal, we need to understand the experiences and skills our students bring with them as they enter our institution. Meanwhile, the administration seeks improvements to student retention across the university curriculum, with special emphasis on freshman courses such as writing. We take seriously the university’s concerns about retention and are convinced that anecdotal knowledge is not adequate grounds for shaping our curriculum and teaching strategies toward improving pass rates (and deepening learning) in our writing courses.

Our process

The study design depended on student researchers, so the careful training of these inexperienced investigators was an important first stage. Nia and Marisha took the NCCU-specified basic course in Social and Behavior Research through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) until they earned certification. They also were instructed by Kathryn and Collie on research design protocols, including surveying and focus group facilitation.

IRB approval was received for the study design and for one subsequent modification. The survey instrument was adapted from one developed by Addison and McGee (2010). It gathered basic demographic data in addition to questions focused on participants’ experiences of the transition from high school English to college writing courses, and it specifically included questions suggested by the student researchers. We used Likert scaled and open-ended questions adapted to fit our institutional context. Investigators – all four of us -- surveyed students over the age of 18 who were enrolled in one of three courses: our developmental writing course, Composition I, or Composition II. We gathered data from multiple sections of each course. By the end of our study, we had administered and entered data from 150 student surveys representing eleven sections.

Marisha and Nia also conducted and recorded one student focus group. We were familiar with the undergraduate Wabash-Provost Scholars at North Carolina A&T (Hornsby et al., 2010) who had led focus groups of their peers, and we wanted to adopt similar practices in order to augment our quantitative findings with qualitative texture. Still, none of the four of us had experience leading or participating in focus groups. Under our tight deadline, we were not able to arrange formal trainings from more experienced group leaders. Instead, we read relevant resources and discussed the relationship between our overarching research questions and what we might gain from focus group research, as well as challenges we anticipated during this practice. Nia and Marisha agreed that they were more likely to get frank responses from their peers if faculty were not present. They took full responsibility for the logistics of planning and recruitment during this part of the research. In mid-April, they independently led a session of fellow students, adapting the protocols recommended by New York State Teachers Center (2008).

At that event (evening of April 11, in a residence hall), the facilitators used guided open-ended questions to elicit comments comparing students’ high school and college writing experiences. Students were asked to identify both what helped them make the transition and what interfered with successful transition into this new environment. Marisha acted as recorder while Nia led discussion, improvising from the prepared questions in order to keep the conversation moving and follow where students’ responses led. Nia reported that

students seemed very comfortable speaking with them as peers. Listening to the recording later convinced us all that we would have indeed been less likely to hear such frank discussion had faculty been present.

Reflections on the Process

One of the first things that Collie and Kathryn noticed about this process was that our group meetings at the beginning of the study were shaped by faculty needs to mentor student researchers. In that effort, we articulated the project for ourselves as well, and developed a regular habit of discussing it. Because we were accountable to our student researchers, we collaborated more diligently than we might have otherwise. This partnership was good for us as researchers because we felt accountable to each other.

We also noticed that the design of the study changed in ways we could not have anticipated. Although grant time constraints meant that Collie and Kathryn wrote the IRB, Marisha and Nia reviewed all materials and suggested survey changes that were subsequently submitted to the IRB. Looking at the questions from students' perspectives, they realized that there was useful information that students might want and be able to offer that we had not asked. They also knew the campus spaces and residential culture better than the faculty, and they selected times and locations for focus groups. Focus group questions evolved organically as Nia and Marisha navigated the real moments with real participants.

Marisha and Nia also raised methodological issues that sparked ideas for future research. One example was the discussion of whether to have focus group participants select their own pseudonyms. Although the idea was tabled during this phase because of no turnout for our second attempt at a focus group (which was scheduled during exams week), it was still a promising idea and a worthwhile conversation for us to have as co-investigators since ethical representation of participants is a central concern of contemporary researchers.

Determining data analysis tools was also an arena where the partnership proved valuable. At a crucial point in the process, Marisha's technical expertise allowed us to continue in the face of what seemed to be an overwhelming obstacle. Collie and Kathryn were unable to process a request to purchase special software, and both were unfamiliar with other options. Marisha introduced us to a Googledocs form for entering and manipulating survey data, which allowed us an immediate way to assess the accruing results from our survey.

Preliminary findings from our project

- Student comments enrich survey statistics that show dramatic variation in students' reading and writing experiences in high school. Our focus group suggested that students from literacy-rich backgrounds may find our composition classes "easier" than high school. Meanwhile, less experienced readers and writers struggle to make sense of unfamiliar college workloads and expectations.
- Almost half of those surveyed said they had made use of our university's writing center. Open-ended comments and focus group respondents suggested that students valued the help they received there, but also indicated a need for more capacity.

- 22% of students surveyed had repeated a composition class due to a D or F grade. This finding corresponds with university data about overall first to second year retention rates.
- Half of the students surveyed reported that they sometimes do not turn in assignments, while one third of respondents reported spending less than 6 hours per week on reading and writing assignments for all their college classes. Department faculty members were taken aback at the latter finding.

So what do we make of this? Our data makes it impossible to speak in generalizations about the literacies of entering NCCU students – and that may be a helpful counter to widespread faculty assumptions. We were distressed to note that by the end of their freshman year only 55% of those surveyed believed that high school had prepared them to do well in college. The responsibility of helping students navigate the complex transition into college literacies is a significant challenge for writing instructors who strive to meet the needs of such a diverse group of learners. Further investigation will help us see, from faculty perspectives, what we currently do so that we can reshape it to meet the diverse learning needs of our students.

Unexpected Outcomes

Engaging students in our SoTL project was unexpectedly valuable for the faculty members as researchers. Because we were accountable to our student researchers, we collaborated more diligently than we might have otherwise. This helped us cement our research partnership with each other and we are inspired to continue this work within our respective research agendas. Including students in our research process also helped us integrate our roles as researchers and mentors.

We additionally found that our study increased student interest in research mentoring. Marisha and Nia found the process and the results eye-opening. They have expressed interest in participating in future research, but their experiences have also had further impact. Students who heard about their peers' involvement in the study expressed interest in becoming future research partners. This was an unanticipated and highly welcome indication that students may have their own compelling motivations for joining us in this kind of work.

We have not analyzed all of our data, and we plan a second stage of this research. Yet the preliminary findings are already having an impact on our department. We shared some early findings with our colleagues at a department meeting at the opening of our fall 2011 semester. We were pleased at the degree of interest our colleagues expressed. Many asked for copies of the survey so they could gather similar data from their upcoming classes. One colleague raised a call for discussion of differentiated instruction, given our findings and recommendations. In the first weeks of class, some faculty adapted our survey or used a briefer one circulated by another faculty member. They wanted to learn about their students' literacy experiences. We are encouraged by this desire among our colleagues to use our findings, gather evidence in their own classes, and adapt their teaching accordingly.

In that same faculty meeting, we discussed the advantages we had experienced in our faculty-student partnerships. Other faculty shared their own positive outcomes from involving students in their research, and to increase faculty-student research partnerships emerged as a goal our department will pursue for the upcoming year. Though our initial

project had a limited time-frame, and our research is not yet finalized, we believe working with students jumpstarted a SoTL initiative within our department that has ramifications beyond the sheer necessity of gathering credible data.

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