CUR Focus

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Informal Local Research Aids Student and Faculty Learning

Faculty members are often reluctant to assign research in foundational classes or in classes enrolling non-majors. In such contexts, student research might seem like an inefficient way to meet the course's learning outcomes, and it also seems unlikely that the research would contribute usefully to the discipline. However, while it is important that students have opportunities to conduct serious, long-term disciplinary research under faculty mentorship, informal research has a meaningful place in coursework as well.

Both formal research and informal research can be used to help students find answers and make decisions, though formal research includes stronger attention to design, methodology, and statistical analysis in order to offer an original contribution that meets disciplinary standards. Informal research, on the other hand, has lower stakes and is not vetted as thoroughly in terms of design, methodology, or analysis. Further, informal research is not likely to be published in disciplinary journals. Informal research clearly has limitations, but its value should also be recognized.

As Mary B. Shapiro (2010) argues, "even 'bad' research may lead students to form good hypotheses" and help students "learn about the scientific method" (48). Indeed, courses that focus not just on content but also on "learning how to learn" are important for meeting 21-century needs, especially as such courses teach students to problem-solve by appropriately collecting and analyzing data (Partridge and Sandover 2010). Additionally, informal research can increase "student engagement, learning, and prosocial attitudes" (Shapiro 2010, 48). In other words, even quick and dirty research can meaningfully support learning as students closely engage the course material and simultaneously develop research skills.

Informal research that focuses on local issues, furthermore, not only helps students to apply course ideas to real-world situations but can also make a difference to the community. Student research in teaching and learning has garnered attention for doing exactly that, with the "community" consisting of teachers and students, both of whom reap pedagogical benefits. At this point, most research on peda-gogy and student learning has been conducted by teachers and scholars. Many such studies incorporate student voices, but "until recently, the student involvement in teaching and learning research has been as a source of data for academic investigators, who have 'listened' to, and then reported, the student voice" (Partridge and Sandover 2010). Students can have a stronger role, however, "as agents of change" if they are the ones setting the research agenda, implementing it, and publicizing it (Burkhill et al., cited in Partridge and Sandover 2010).

As students conduct such research on a local level, they can "take an active role in shaping their own learning experience," ultimately leading to student engagement because the work is so clearly relevant (Partridge and Sandover 2010). Importantly, it is not only the students who benefit. The university itself can grow as students "contribute to curriculum design and development" using experiences and perspectives that "can lead to significant enhancements" in the institution (Campbell et al. 2009, 29). Simply put, local student research in teaching and learning benefits all involved, even when done on a small scale.

It was exactly this sort of research that was conducted by students in a composition theory class I taught at Marywood University in fall 2009. While half of the students were English majors, the rest came from many other disciplines, and the class included sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Furthermore, none of them had been exposed to composition theory before my class, and there was a lot of ground to cover. While such factors could have easily deterred me from assigning research, in this case, I saw an opportunity. As Marywood University's writing coordinator, I assess and support undergraduate writing, and it made sense that composition-theory students could apply ideas from course readings while finding out potentially useful information about their peers' writing experiences. My assignment thus asked students to choose a writing topic based on course readings; collect local data; and present their findings on a web page that would be useful for Marywood faculty. While such a study could be a full-blown research project lasting

a semester or more, in this course it was compressed into a week and a half. Still, even this quick informal research helped students meet course outcomes while contributing to university writing initiatives.

Assignment Design & Student Learning

The composition-theory course in which I assigned this project was structured in chronological units that traced major developments in composition research from the 1960s to the present. The project was assigned early in the term to help students become more comfortable with understanding and applying composition scholarship in general; at the same time, it reinforced major themes of early composition theory on which students could build during the rest of the semester. The project thus contributed to learning outcomes aimed at helping students improve in their ability to "identify major trends and arguments in composition studies," "respond to scholarly texts," and "talk with others about writing" (McMillan 2009, "ENGL 475"). Specifically, the research project asked students to respond to composition trends in the 1960s and '70s, especially the foundational research of scholars such as James Kinneavy, Donald Murray, Mina Shaugnessy, and Janet Emig. Each of those scholars theorizes about writing and how writing is best learned and taught, generally beginning with criticism of traditional methods and emphasizing more productive pedagogical approaches.

With this focus on improving the teaching of writing, it made sense for my students to synthesize these course readings by finding out how often the ideas of these key composition scholars were being applied on our campus. Students thus worked in collaborative groups to find out how early research about writing and pedagogy was being enacted on Marywood's campus, keeping in mind that Marywood faculty would be the audience for their findings.

The whole project was to be completed in just over a week, so we kept it straightforward and simple; yet every step helped students synthesize early composition work in order to see how the theories of teaching and learning writing were (or were not) being applied at our university. To focus the research, students looked back over readings and brainstormed questions that might be investigated on campus. We then compiled a cumulative list of potential research

Students Damani Irby and Adam McIlwee (back row) and Angel Fuller and Katy Zurinski (front row) pose for a photo to be included on their 2009 research web page, The Writing Process (https://sites.google.com/a/maryu. marywood.edu/lauriem/writing-resources/student-writing-processes).

questions on the blackboard that was quite extensive and included items such as:

- How early do students start working on an assignment?
- What kinds of writing are students assigned?
- How often are students required to hand in drafts?
- Do assignment sheets emphasize grammar more than content?
- How much teacher feedback is helpful?
- What kinds of teacher comments are helpful?
- Is peer review useful?

Once we had generated a large number of questions, we clustered the areas of inquiry into four broad categories, and each student group was assigned one of the following categories: 1) students' experience with writing, 2) students' assignment preferences, 3) students' writing processes, and 4) students' use of feedback. These steps alone—brainstorming questions and forming categories to focus research—helped reinforce the major themes and the relevant theories of early composition research. At the same time, students were using inquiry in ways similar to the composition scholars whom they had been studying.

The next steps required students to use research skills in ways that helped them understand the difficulties compo-

sition researchers regularly face. Students designed their studies in class, with a "Planning Sheet" directing them to first decide on the "three to five questions [related to their category] that seem most interesting and useful to teachers" at our university (McMillan 2009, "Planning"). Once they had focused the scope of their research, they were asked to decide on how they would find the answers, using methods such as "survey or interview, [with] multiple choice or open answers" (McMillan 2009, "Planning"). In a more formal research assignment, this step would have been given more attention, and research designs would have been fully vetted.

However, even this informal approach helped students think about the importance of methodology. For example, one student research group's web page explains that the group's "survey was presented to students in the form of an open-ended question" and thus "students were permitted to somewhat elaborate on the question being asked" (Irby et al. 2009). Here, students are justifying their research choices. When they presented data on the number of writing courses students have taken, students in another group noted that one of their questions might have been unclear: "We are unsure of the accuracy of these results because we believe that some surveyed did not realize we meant only writing-specific courses" (Brennan et al. 2009). In this case, students learned not just from their successes but also from their failures. Each time research approaches were explained or results were questioned because of research design, students were demonstrating awareness of methodology and the way it complicates findings. At the same time that students were practicing transferable research skills, they were becoming more familiar with the kinds of questions about methodology that regularly arise in composition scholarship.

Once students focused their research and planned their methods for gathering data, they collected data outside of class, and they communicated their results on web pages set up during a class workshop. Throughout these steps, students faced challenges common to all researchers, such as how to find participants, how to increase validity and reliability, and how to analyze and communicate results. Because the stakes were fairly low, however, students became more aware of the difficulties of conducting strong research studies without necessarily needing to resolve every problem. Students

expressed appreciation for the variety of skills involved in research, and working collaboratively helped them recognize both academic and interpersonal attributes that were of value during the research process. These included the ability to write clear questions, talk comfortably to potential participants, create graphs, interpret data, and design a web page. In peer evaluations, students regularly noted such strengths in other members of their groups. Although the research was informal and completed quickly, students still expressed awareness of the skill sets strong scholars need to employ.

Although some students put more effort into the research than others, for the most part students demonstrated their learning as they took on the roles of experts when publishing their findings on their web pages. For example, the group exploring students' use of teacher feedback said their peers' response was "exactly the type of response we were hoping for" ("Student Use of Feedback" 2009), almost as if the researchers were not students themselves but instead were aligned with composition scholars. This stance was taken even further on another webpage that concluded by establishing a connection with Janet Emig's (1977) belief in "Writing as a Mode of Learning": "Likewise, we want to move writing from just a homework assignment in the Marywood classroom to a focus in the student education" (Brennan et al. 2009). Here, despite the informality of the research, the students framed it with purpose and worth that connected their work to the scholarship they had been reading. In an earlier paragraph on that web page, the students acted as strong advisors to faculty, reminding teachers that "it is imperative for those who are imparting knowledge to be aware of the caliber and degree of experience their pupils possess" (Brennan et al. 2009).

Even though the research process in my assignment was extremely informal, it still helped students recognize themselves as scholars with information that should be shared with others in order to potentially effect change. Indeed, even students who completed only minimal work referred back to the early semester readings and research throughout the rest of the term. Clearly, students' familiarity with trends in early composition scholarship increased, and they better understood the potentials and limitations of composition research processes as well.

Applications: Faculty Learning

While any course assignment needs to first benefit students and their learning, the usefulness of local research helps many students feel invested precisely because they are meeting others' needs. The student web pages were connected to my composition website in order to be easily accessible to faculty interested in developing their teaching of writing. Furthermore, as writing coordinator at a university that does not have any writing requirement beyond a first-semester composition class, I have been able to use the students' research as I encourage teachers to assign and support undergraduate writing.

Specifically, I have used the research to a) highlight student experiences in my faculty workshops on writing pedagogy and b) provide supplemental information in an annual Undergraduate Writing Assessment Report, especially when proposing that a requirement for an intensive writing experience for all students be considered by the core curriculum committee. In both these situations, the students' research has not been a driving force but instead has helpfully supplemented other material with relevant local information.

In workshops with faculty, the students' research provides information and provokes discussion. For a workshop on designing effective assignments, for example, faculty members discuss sample assignments, and I then introduce the information our Marywood students have published online. One point that faculty often debate is whether students' writing assignments should stipulate the number of pages required. We turn to the data showing that most students like to know how long an assignment is (Bridger et al. 2009), and we can then have a conversation about it.

Often, the first interpretation of the data is that students are not interested in thinking and learning and instead want a fill-in-the-blank assignment. But once faculty talk about their own writing experiences, they begin to realize that they all normally have a sense of how long publications should be as they work on them, and this knowledge shapes their writing decisions. The student data thus spurs faculty to identify with students' circumstances.

In that same workshop on designing effective assignments, I also discuss problematic findings from the student researchers' web pages. For example, a number of Marywood students show resistance to peer review and to workshops on how to use the library (Bridger et al. 2009). While such data could simply lead to faculty omitting these elements from their classrooms, the workshop setting provides an opportunity to discuss how peer review and/or library workshops can be implemented more effectively. Local research—even informal research—thus identifies areas that need faculty attention. As faculty members connect with student experiences and perspectives, we can make better-informed and more thoughtful pedagogical decisions. Ultimately, the students' research benefits students themselves because it helps faculty improve writing pedagogy in their classrooms.

In addition to using the student research in faculty workshops, I have also included some of the findings in assessment reports. Specifically, I have used information about what kinds of writing students are doing and which disciplines tend to assign writing (Brennan et al. 2009). I gather similar information through other campus surveys and studies, but these measures have generally shown less campus emphasis on writing than the students' findings, which noted a wide variety of assignments and disciplines in which writing was included (Brennan et al. 2009). This student-driven data has been helpful in the proposal of a writing intensive (WI) core requirement. In order to develop such a requirement, we need a host of classes that could either currently meet WI standards or could be changed slightly in order to fill WI criteria. The research conducted by students helps pinpoint some of the departments that are already supporting undergraduate writing and could thus be leaders in a WI initiative. Just as some of the data were problematic and helped lead to changed teaching practices, other data were positive and have helped inspire and encourage other teachers to follow suit by integrating writing more fully in their courses.

While not every teacher can use student research in an administrative role the way that I have, my experiences do suggest that informal research has a place in academia, because it supports students as active learners and can yield useful information. Especially in courses in which students regularly read academic research in the discipline, it seems important to go beyond having "students learn about research findings," in order to have "students learn as researchers" (Braber 2011, 3). Research in teaching and learning may be an especially fruitful area for students who

wish to make a difference in their local contexts. Instead of reserving research for semester-long projects, we serve students and one another better if we encourage students to be experts and scholars in small ways on a frequent basis.

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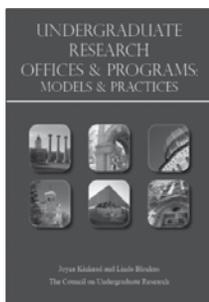
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