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In Their Own Words: Using Students' Writing to Develop a Digital Manual for New College Students

Kristen di Gennaro
Dyson College of Arts and Sciences, Pace University

Agie Markiewicz
Writing Center, NYC, Pace University

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Project Title

In Their Own Words:
Using Students' Writing to Develop a Digital Manual for New College Students

Type of grant

Cornerstone I

Principal Investigators

Kristen di Gennaro, Director of ESL, English Department, Dyson College
Agie Markiewicz, Writing Center Coordinator, NYC Campus

Interim Report Submitted

May 15, 2012

A) Original Goals

Our project aims to identify and classify various types of writing issues typical of Pace University Freshmen, with the goal of developing digital instructional materials for both faculty and students at Pace University, as well as for high school teachers preparing students for college-level writing. In order to develop such an empirically-derived set of instructional materials, the data for our project include authentic student writing submitted as part of placement testing procedures from recent years.

B) Progress towards original goals made to date

The project is progressing according to schedule. In December, 2011 we applied for approval from Pace's Institutional Review Board. We received approval from the IRB in February, 2012. In March, 2012, we gathered the raw data for the project (200 randomly selected essays from an existing pool of English placement exams), and prepared them for raters by stripping essays of all identifying markers in order to protect students' identities. In April, 2012, we recruited two raters with expertise in rating writing samples. Both raters are currently Pace adjunct faculty members. We conducted training sessions with the raters to familiarize them with the scoring rubric designed for the project, and raters followed up with additional norming sessions amongst themselves. The raters are currently reading and rating the raw data and are expected to provide scores towards the middle of June. Once we receive raters' scores, we will analyze the numerical data and prepare for the subsequent coding stage.

C) Project's impact on students

Upon completion of the project, first-year composition students will benefit by receiving a more targeted set of materials in their composition classrooms and at the Pace University Writing Center.

D) Project's impact on other faculty members

The adjunct faculty members currently engaged in the rating stage of the project are gaining valuable insight into the types of writing produced by incoming students and have been able to shape the development of the project by discussing their interpretations of the project's instruments and the construct of academic writing ability. Since the adjunct faculty participants are also composition instructors, this experience will likely influence their teaching. Future composition instructors and other faculty will ultimately benefit from the final results of the project once the materials have been created and made available to them.

E) Next steps

In the coming months, we expect to:

- Receive the numerical data from raters
- Analyze the data with statistical software (such as SPSS)
- Identify a subset of essays to be coded for errors
- Recruit and train adjunct faculty members to code the data for errors
- Receive codings from adjunct faculty participants
- Analyze the data in the codings
- Summarize trends discovered in the data
- Prepare results from data analyses for dissemination.

Once we have summarized the analyses from the preceding stages of the project, we expect to:

- Work with a software designer to build templates for describing writing issues for both instructors and students
- Create materials to address the writing issues identified
- Make materials available to the Pace community through the *Thinkfinity* platform and ePortfolio.