

Inexperience and Innovation

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In the summer that preceded our first semester at Wittenberg University, when questioned about our decision to commit to an intensive research program in a field we knew absolutely nothing about, the three of us likely gave the same robotic answer: “It is a wonderful opportunity.” We knew that we were paired with a faculty mentor to work collaboratively on a research project during our first year, and we knew that we’d been presented with a project intended to study the effectiveness of eTutoring comments in Wittenberg University’s Writing Center. And that was it. At the time, we had no idea just how true the statement about opportunity really was. Almost two full years later, it’s amazing to look back on what we’ve accomplished as a result of the FYRA (First Year Research Award) program. As soon as we began the research process in the fall semester, we were immersed in writing center literature, which helped us further develop our research question. Then, in the spring semester, we went through the semester-long training course to become advisors in the Writing Center. (A little bit backwards, we know!) We also participated in the Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies and presented at both regional and international writing center conferences. How many people can say all that about their first two years in college?

Though all those opportunities and experiences have made our research experience unique, one of our greatest takeaways has been the unexpected but strong friendship this project has sparked. Amidst the hours of norming and the midnight number-crunching sessions and the seven-hour road trips (complete with karaoke!), our team grew pretty dang close. At this point, trying to explain our relationship to people has gotten rather complex. It usually goes something like this: “They’re my friends, but they also work at the Writing Center with me, and they’re my co-researchers for this really hard-to-explain research project we’re doing.” Neither our friendship nor our research project would be complete without the other. In this reflection, we hope to shed some light on the experiences of three undergraduate researchers and highlight the work we have done over the last two years studying asynchronous eTutoring comments.

Our research focuses on one of the challenges writing centers face: often, we have no tangible results from our sessions. There is no paper trail, no way to tell what kinds of changes writers make, if any. As writing center sessions center around tutor feedback, the inability of tutors to know if writers are

finding their suggestions helpful prevents growth for both parties. To address this shortcoming, we elected to analyze papers submitted through eTutoring on our writing center software, WCONLINE. This route allows for a record of first drafts and tutors' comments, which appear on the right side of Microsoft Word documents. For those students who resubmit their papers, we can see the revisions that correspond to those comments. Our research taps into the potential of this record as we analyzed the overall effectiveness of asynchronous eTutoring comments. To analyze the asynchronous eTutoring comments, we mainly utilized Stephen Witte and Lester Faigley's 1981 taxonomy of revision changes from "Analyzing Revision."

Because we were all completely new to the writing center field at the beginning of our research process, a lot of these concepts felt particularly slippery. We spent our first semester solely reading articles about rhetoric, composition, and writing center theory and practice, but it still felt insufficient compared to the decades others had spent developing and refining these ideas. This is one of the characteristics that makes our experience as undergraduate researchers unique. So, it was (understandably) challenging for us to comprehend how our work fit into that larger picture. On that front, we're still learning; one of the biggest comments we got at the Naylor Workshop was to read a well-known scholar of asynchronous eTutoring whose work we had somehow missed in our review of the literature. Another difficulty was the taxonomy itself. Between the vagueness of the categories and the occasional ambiguity of the tutors' comments, we spent hours alone trying to categorize our comments, only to spend more hours defending our choices when we met for norming. Those hours of norming, however, became some of the first building blocks of our relationship, allowing us to strengthen not only our research but also our teamwork and friendship.

And, one of the most powerful moments for us as researchers came from our struggles with that taxonomy. For nearly a year by that point, we had been working with a revised version of the taxonomy, including two categories we had added, and thought little of it. We received feedback from one of the mentors at the Naylor Workshop recommending that we claim this taxonomy as a product of our own research, a moment which opened our eyes to our legitimacy and power as researchers. Through this experience, we learned how research is very much a living process; by metaphorically standing on the shoulders of others, we were able to see a bit farther into the growing field of writing center work. Though we are still basically newbies in the field, we are leaving our mark. (At least we hope to!) Going forward, we plan to write and submit an article soon and see it published before we graduate.

Since then, we've definitely encountered more confusion and roadblocks, but our team and project have flourished. Extending past the intended end

date of the FYRA program, our work has continued through our second year at Wittenberg as well. This opportunity allowed us to travel to three conferences and workshops in a six-month period. Though our journey may be coming to an end, we will continue to be mentors for the upcoming Writing Center FYRA recipients. They may not have the same amazing whirlwind of experiences that we did—either professionally or socially—but we will pass on to them the lesson we learned from conducting research together: inexperience can foster innovation.

Works Cited

Faigley, Lester and Stephen Witte. "Analyzing Revision." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1981, pp. 400-414.