

WDI Final Report – May 24th, 2016

LIN410 Critical Reading and Writing in English Linguistics (Winter session)

Prepared by Dr. Michelle Troberg, course instructor.

Summary of the writing instruction component:

- As suggested by the title, this course is dedicated entirely to reading and writing in the discipline with the goal of producing students who are strategic and critical readers of academic articles and who are skilled at summarizing arguments and presenting their own.
- The course was organized into weekly 3-hour seminars. Each seminar involved a reading and writing component:
 - Reading: development of strategies for reading academic articles; discussion of content; recognition of rhetorical and stylistic devices.
 - Writing: students undertook a variety of writing activities, from low-stakes reflections, to peer-editing, to focused work on larger assignments (see below).
- The WDI allowed me to offer more low-stakes writing assignments (with feedback) to students and more formative feedback on intermediate drafts of larger assignments: **20 grader hours.**

Summary of the writing activities undertaken by students involved in the project:

- Students worked on a number of different writing activities during the 3-hour seminar: individual/group response to the reading; ticket-out-the-door/reflection; summary exercises; citation conventions; peer editing; engagement with the instructor in self-editing; making modifications based on grader/instructor feedback.
- All larger assignments received intermediate feedback from the grader or the instructor. These assignments built on one another, providing a progression of skills that would be necessary for the final paper:
 - Summary (2)
 - Annotated bibliography
 - Final research paper proposal (thesis, justification, summary, annotated bibliography)
 - Group writing project: summary with critical commentary
 - Final research paper

Evaluation of the project's effectiveness

- Before and after:
 - On the first day of class, in groups of 3, students wrote a summary of the first article we discussed. The summaries were by and large unorganized, unsophisticated, and lacking in the vocabulary and style of our discipline. Crucially, students were not aware of how their writing could be improved.
 - On the last day of class, students submitted a summary of our final reading. They wrote it in 20 minutes in class on that day. The improvement from the first summary that they wrote in the course was remarkable! I was very moved by them, and so were the students because they were able to recognize the progress they had made.
- Student feedback specific to writing skills (on the course evaluations):
 - I think I definitely benefitted from the course with regards to my writing
 - ... furthered our understanding of our reading and our writing abilities
 - The skills I have learned in this class will take me beyond this course,
 - It helped a lot to improve my writing, not just in linguistics but also in other subjects.
 - The ability to write concisely and to be as efficient as possible with one's words is a skill worth developing in university as it is transferable to the workplace or further education
- Instructor's assessment:
 - The overall improvement in student writing is in part due to the 20 hours of support I received from the WDI. These grader hours allowed the students to receive timely and instructive feedback on first drafts of larger assignments. I would not have been able to provide this kind of formative feedback given all the other feedback that I was offering the students. I was lucky enough to have an excellent grader who knew exactly how to comment on student papers.
 - The course also owes some of its success to the WDI workshop I attended three years ago. It provided me with many practical ideas for low-stakes, formative assessments and scaffolded projects, all anchored in evidence-based research.
 - The class was much smaller than we had predicted, so I was able to give extra support to students; this contributed to the overall success of the course.
 - The course benefited from writing support at the RGASC. Each one of the students received feedback on their writing from Laura Taylor, who had familiarized herself with

the final research project. There were a number of comments about the usefulness of this service in the course evaluations.

Plans for future developments/modifications

LIN410 will be offered again next year, but it will not be funded by the WDI. I assume this is because of the relatively low enrolment. If the calculus for impact of the WDI is based on enrolment numbers, then I imagine the Winter 2016 investment must have been seen as a failure. From my perspective, however, it was a huge success. 20 extra hours of grading, amounting to an extra 1.3 hours of valuable formative feedback for each student, resulted in the single biggest improvement in academic writing I have ever seen in a university course. In terms of impact, these 20 hours have contributed to 15 program students in linguistics who can write skilfully and critically. The most striking improvement occurred with the international students, the majority of whom feel (and indeed are) handicapped by their inability to write effectively. The impact of the WDI was significant, and I am very grateful that the course was funded in the first year that it was offered. I hope that the enrolment grows enough so that the course will again benefit from such funding in the future.