**WDI – Final report**

**ANT 102 – Introduction to Sociocultural and Linguistic anthropology**

**Prof. Sarah Hillewaert**

**Fall 2021**

1. What did you do? What happened with regard to the project—i.e., what did you do, what did your TAs do, etc.? Did you do what you planned to do, and if not, why not? Why? Did it change for reasons specific to this class/this year, or for reasons of general practicality given the context?

The proposed project was quite ambitious, particularly given the size of the course (with an approximate enrolment of 600 students and a team of 16 TAs). The goal of the project was to offer first year students in the Social Sciences concrete instruction on writing academic papers by 1) offering scaffolded writing assignments, 2) introducing writing workshops in the tutorials, 3) increase TA hours to allow for better and more detailed feed-forward, 4) providing additional training for TA’s on how to provide constructive feedback/ feedforward (since much of this is lacking in general TA training, and 5) hiring a writing TA, who would focus on developing the writing workshops, providing guidance to the TAs, and offering additional advice to students.

We did not make any chances to the proposed project, and worked on each of the proposed aspects of the WDI. In the summer of 2021, I worked with the writing TA as well as with Sarah Seeley and Michael Kaler to develop 1) a better and clearer 3-step written assignment (with clear instructions), 2) 3 writing workshops, focused on argument development, paper organization, and use of evidence to be incorporated in the tutorials, 3) a clear rubric for students to use as they work on their papers.

Students were given a 3-step written assignment, asking them to critically engage with a documentary (selected from a list provided), using the anthropological knowledge they had gained from the course. The assignment consisted of 1) a not-graded “get your thoughts out” short paper, 2) a first draft, 3) a final draft. To each of these, TA’s gave extensive feedback (dedicating approximately 20min to each assignment per student). Writing workshops helped students understand each step of the paper writing process, preparing them for each of their written assignment submissions.

Throughout the semester 4 journal entries encouraged students to engage better with reading and writing, by identifying an article’s argument and analyzing what made it strong, identifying which evidence an author used for their argument, and identifying the organization of an article – an applying each of these to their own writing.

1. How did it work (objective)? What do you know about the project’s results **with regard to the learning objectives**from objective testimony (e.g., analysis of student writing produced)?

From an objective perspective, the positive impact of the WDI on students’ writing was evident. I based this assessment on:

* **The average grade for the final paper**
	+ While the task for the written assignment remained the same, the average grade for the final paper went up significantly from the previous year. Whereas in Fall 2020, the average mark was 70%, the average score for the final paper in Fall 2021 (with the WDI) was 78%. The 8% overall increase speaks to the success of the WDI.
* **The WDI official report and evaluation of the writing in ANT 102**
	+ The WDI report notes minor improvements between the draft and the final paper submission, highlighting students’ continued problems with the development of a strong thesis statement. However, students in the A and B-range papers were able to write remarkably strong thesis statements and were successful at incorporating evidence into their papers. For a first-year course, it is remarkably that a large group of students were able to develop their own voice (in a first semester course).
	+ Given the fact that the average score for the final paper is 78%, a large group of students in this course did fall in the A and B-range grades for the final paper.
	+ The WDI report does note only minor improvements between the draft and the final submission. However, it is important to note that students submitted a “first thoughts paper” before the draft submission, and received the most feedback to that initial submission. Subsequently, they worked on developing a thesis statement with the TA, in tutorials and in the journal submissions. The expectation was that students would already have a thesis statement/argument when they submitted the draft. It is therefore not surprising that this aspect of the assignment did not improve remarkably.
1. How did it work (subjective)? What do you know about the project’s results **with regard to the learning objectives**from subjective testimony, potentially including 1) instructor’s assessment, 2) TA assessments, 3) student assessment?

From a subjective perspective, the WDI was remarkably successful. Initially, I was concerned that the course would be too “writing focused” and students might complain that we stressed writing too much, over other tutorial activities. However, **students** repeatedly emphasized how much they appreciated, for example, the opportunity to first “get their thoughts out,” without needing to worry about “getting it right” and subsequently getting concrete feedback on those initial thoughts. In addition, many stressed how useful they found the explicit writing instructions and the writing workshops. Some upper year students told me they were close to graduating, yet had never received such concrete guidelines about writing academic papers. In the student evaluations, several commented on the writing assignment.

*“All assignments had a purpose, in that they helped us prepare for the final essay, helped us organize our thoughts etc. I especially loved the 'First Thoughts' assignment as it let students express any and all thoughts they had about the topic and connect them to what they understood from the course content.”*

*“I also appreciated the scaffolding approach of preparing the final paper. Although it was completely different from my previous approach to writing papers, I did walk away learning some new techniques on how to approach final/large assignments.”*

*“The feedbacks on the assignment were very clear and helped me understand the goal/instructions of the assignment.”*

**The TA’s** were equally positive about the experience. TA’s who taught ANT 102 with me before repeatedly emphasized how much better students’ writing was this year, and how much improvement they noted in students’ argument development in particular. They noted less confusion on the side of students’ and more understanding of what it means to develop an anthropological argument. Other TA’s, and especially first-time TA’s, underlined the usefulness of the additional TA training and the grading-focused meetings with the writing TA. They also underlined the clarity of the assignment, and the helpfulness of the 3-step approach. Below, I include feedback from one of my TA’s (although I received several similar emails):

*A lot of my students were incredibly grateful for the way the course built up their writing; even some fourth-year students expressed how it helped them improve a lot. They especially liked the specific feed-forward suggestions on assignments, and the impression I got from them was that it made academic writing feel much more accessible, demystifying “good writing” by giving them concrete steps to achieve it.*

*Several mentioned how they could see their own progress over the course of the semester through the journals and paper stages and were really pleased. On the marking side, I could definitely see their progress too, and I think the lower-stakes journal submissions were particularly effective in helping students to develop their academic writing.*

*Additionally, breaking the final paper into stages really did help students with the essay, particularly for first-years who had to catch up a bit more. I think being able to check in with their paper direction twice before the final draft definitely improved the quality of their work and the development of their ideas.*

As **an instructor**, I as well noted less confusion among students. During office hours, students would join to brainstorm ideas, to present arguments, or to ask clarification about theoretical concepts they would like to use in their papers. This differed from last year, when students often weren’t sure what we meant by an argumentative paper or were confused as to how they ought to construct their own argument in the first place or what organization their paper should take. The papers I read were much better organized, had stronger argumentative statements and showed that students were trying to develop their own voice (rather than providing a mere summary of the documentary, which had been the case previously).

1. What have you learned? What worked best? What didn’t work? What do you know now that you didn’t know at the start of the year? How do you feel overall about the project? Did it accomplish the goals that motivated you to propose it?

Overall, I believe the WDI was a tremendous success and I would like to extend this program into the Fall of 2022. Without a doubt, students and TA’s both benefited from the additional time, the clear instructions, and the writing workshops. I feel extremely happy about the project, particularly because I know first year students’ left this course understanding more about academic writing and being better prepared for their second semester and second year at UTM. As many students will continue into the Social Sciences stream, the explicit instruction (together with powerpoints and handouts) will benefit them as they continue to write academic papers.

However, I did note that the combination of the 3-step paper and the 4 journal entries ended up being quite a lot of work, close together, for students as well as for TAs. While none of them really objected to the workload, it did feel like there was always some piece of writing to submit or to grade. Particularly for the TAs, the timeframe in which assignments needed to be graded and returned ended up being quite tight, resulting in some students not receiving feedback on their journal entries before a written assignment was due. I am therefore considering reducing the journal entries to 3 rather than 4, which will allow for a better spreading of these tasks throughout the semester.

In the end, I definitely think we accomplished the goals that motivated my initial proposal. Indeed, it partially exceeded my expectations. There is always room for improvement, but I am incredibly happy with the way this first year WDI played out.

1. What would you change? a) Do you intend to run this project again, and if so, will there be b) changes to the course and/or c) changes to the project based on your experience running it?

As I noted above, I would definitely like to run this program again. And I would change little to the way the written assignment and related course activities are set up. There are a few minor changes I would like to make, including:

* Change the journal entries from 4 to 3 entries over the course of the semester.
* Fine tune the writing workshops in response to some TA feedback and the WDI report. In particular, I want to include a discussion of body paragraph structure and have more time to discuss how to incorporate evidence into a paper so that it supports the main thesis/argument.
* I would like to stick to the main focus of the assignment – discussing a documentary in relation to the course material – but I will 1) change up the list of documentaries students can watch, 2) try to include a lecture on visual anthropology to provide students with a better understanding of anthropology and documentary film making.
* I would also like to continue with the TA training, since I likely will have a largely new group of TAs. Because the focus on feed-forward is so important for the success of this initiative, teaching TAs to give effective comments and guidance is essential.

The original budget for the WDI was as follows:

2 hours of additional training x 14 TAs = 28 hours

24 hours for lead writing TA (at an approximate 2hrs/week) = 24 hrs

20min/per student to evaluate writing journals x 700 = 233 hrs

(4 journal entries throughout the semester)

20min/per student to evaluate first draft of paper x 700 = 233 hrs

Total of requested TA hours = 518

**The revised budget would be as follows:**

2 hours of additional training for TAs x 7 = 14 hours

(the WDI wasn’t able to accommodate such a large group of TAs last year, thus the adjusted number here).

24 hours for lead writing TA (at an approximate 2hrs/week) = 24 hrs

18min/per student to evaluate writing journals x 700 = 210 hrs

(3 journal entries throughout the semester at approximately 6min per submission)

20min/per student to evaluate first draft of paper x 700 = 233 hrs

**Total of requested TA hours = 481**