ANT313 Writing Development Initiative 2021-2022, Final Report

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**What we did**

This WDI project was built on years of collaborations with Drs. Tyler Evans-Tokaryk (2015) and Michael Kaler (since 2016) and so we had the basic materials to start with. With the additional WDI support, I restructured the weekly topics and adjusted the writing assignment to further enhance the writing aspects of the course. Originally in my WDI proposal I planned to remove exams entirely to allow students learn better through writing; however, when I taught my first online course ANT200 in Fall 2021 where tests were replaced by experiential learning, I learned that tests were the primary motivation for most students to learn. Therefore, I incorporated two online quizzes (16% of final mark) in ANT313 to replace the three exams implemented in previous years.

Eighty-four percent of the final mark is writing-related. Students were required to sign up for a topic at the beginning of the semester to work in a group of 4-5 students on the same topic, and then each student need to submit their references, annotations, integration of annotations and thesis statement, essay. In all steps except the annotations, students are required to provide feedback to their peers. After each student have submitted their essay, the group worked as a team to prepare a 12-min presentation on their topic. I also provided students with the option to revise and resubmit their essays for grading after the team presentation.

According to the new course design and with the assistance from Dr. Kaler and the TA, I updated the writing guidelines, marking rubrics, and one of two sets of writing exercises. We also developed a new set of writing exercises according to the current essay topic options. Dr. Kaler continued to run two in-class writing workshops to familiarize students with the planning, preparing, writing, and grading process of the writing assignments. He also dedicated office hours to assist ANT313 students with their writing assignments. In addition, the TA provided students with detailed feedforward to all submissions leading to the final essays.

Due to a crisis of family transition and the situational depression, I was unable to offer feedback to early submissions. However, I did my best to oversee the student comments in each topic group and either corrected the errors for them or pointed them to reliable sources to verify the information. In addition, I provided written guidance to each topic group after reviewing their essays and peer comments and while they were preparing the team presentation. My guidance highlighted the strengths of each team member’s essay and the team as a whole, suggested a structure or priorities to each team for their presentation, and encouraged them to improve the weakness. Students expressed their appreciation of my comments both verbally and through email.

**How it worked (objective)**

Students’ writing assignments, especially the essays, were of much higher quality than those in previous years. In the following table I listed the averaged scores of the assignments for 2020 (last time I taught it) and 2022. The data suggested that students did better literature research right from the start (average ETR increased from 84.2% to 90.3%), which likely benefited from signing up for a topic group much ahead of time, the peer interactions they had, and the opportunity to revise their ETR after seeing the original ETR submissions in their group. The quality of annotations does not seem to have improved compared to previous years. However, the synthesis of annotations and thesis statement was better than 2020, and the essay quality was significantly higher than those in 2020. The peer interactions, my guidance to each group, and the team preparation for the oral presentation all contributed to enhance student mastery of the chosen essay topic. Replacing three exams with two online quizzes also freed students from substantial passive learning to more active learning through research and writing. Detailed TA feedforward no doubt had helped students understand the expectations of the writing assignment, get them back to the right track if they went off topic, and improve their understanding of data and interpretation. However, the TA’s contributions are not reflected on the grade comparison table below, as students in 2020 had the same structure of TA support using an educational fund from UTM anthropology department.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Ave. ETR | Ave. Five annotations | Ave. STS | Ave. Essay |
| **2022** | **90.3** | **76.1** | **73** | **80.1** |
| 2020 | 84.2 | 78.0 | 71.5 | 71.3 |

Note: ETR = Essay topic and reference, STS = Synthesis (of annotations) and Thesis Statement,

The Assessment report from Dr. Kaler’s team indicated marginal improvements between submissions of Annotation 1 and Annotation 2 in 2022, with the exception of two assignments that showed a decrease in the work quality. In general, the submissions were well written with correct grammar, clear sentences, and formal language. However, Dr. Kaler’s team also pointed out that students struggled the most with explaining why the source supported their argument. I suspect this was primarily due to me not being able to repeatedly remind students (and the TA!) about my expectations for the annotations – this was less of an issue in previous years when I was in my normal healthy status. Students tend to summarize the main arguments from the references (which is what a typical annotation does), but in ANT313 I wanted students to selectively extracting pertinent information from the readings to use in their essay and explain the relevance. In previous years I repeatedly explained these to students and it normally took 2-3 annotations for students to finally understand my expectations. This year’s TA, Anne-Julie was a first-year master student who had just started to learn about East Asian archaeology (the course subject!), and so there was a big learning curve for her as well.

**How worked (subjective)?**

Subjectively, both students and I felt that their writings had improved. The grades for the annotations did not reflect improvements over the course of the semester in 2022 for the following reasons: (1) the grade for each annotation reflected the positive outcomes of the relevant guidelines, workshops, and exercises, which reduced the room for score improvement between two assignments; (2) inadequate reminder from me about the expectations.

**What I have learned**

As mentioned earlier, having students signed up for a topic group early on, scaffolded the essay to multiple small but accountable tasks, requested peer feedback in writing each step down the road, had them prepare and deliver a team presentation after they have submitted their essays, and encourage revised submission after the presentation were conducive to student learning of both the writing and the subject they write about. The writing workshops also helped students better understand the expectations and put their understanding into practices through reviewing and commenting on writing samples.

One thing that surprised me was that most students didn’t seem to be enthusiastic about joining the weekly writing retreats that I hosted. I hosted three 45-min writing retreats (30 mins writing followed by 15-min Q&A) per week for ANT313 students a week before the first assignment was due and until the last assignment was due. Only two students consistently participated in the retreats and asked questions. In the future I will return to normal office hours with fewer writing retreats, and I will constantly encourage students to join me for writing (something I didn’t do due to family and health issues).

I feel that students benefited greatly from the WDI project. The new structure of the course highlighting writing as a learning tool is effective. The additional TA support and working with experts from RGASC provided me with the intellectual resource and manpower to focus on implementing the best strategies to help students improve their writing skills. I believe I reached my goals in this regard and, if it wasn’t interrupted by my family and health issues, the teaching team would have been able to produce even better outcomes.

**Budget**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tasks | WDI-funded hrs |
| Participating in writing workshops | 2 |
| Providing feedforward on student submissions | 43 |
| Extra TA training | 2 |
|  | **Total: 47** |