

The University of Arizona Longitudinal Study of Student Writers
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Abstract

The University of Arizona Writing Program's Longitudinal Study of Student Writers (UA Study) aims to understand the development of student writing over time. Launched in Fall 2012, the UA Study collected and scored over 290 student writing samples using a multi-trait rubric, and with the support of the CCCC Research Initiatives Grant, the UA Study research team developed its data coding scheme and coded over 488 student six-question writing reflections (completed after drafting the essays already scored), mid-year reflective writing projects (gathered from students' first-year writing courses), and selected interview transcripts.¹ All of these data provide the foundation for the study to transition from big data sets of quantitative data to case studies of continuing participants. The CCCC Research Initiatives Grant also made it possible for the research team to travel to the Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference in July 2014, where we presented on initial connections between affect and metacognition, and on the implications of mixed-methods research to Writing Program Administration. At present, we are examining the ways in which students' literate lives are related to key stories and metaphors of their own writing development, how these stories are most interesting when framed in relationship to larger data coded for their metacognitive understanding and affective relationship to writing, and how sociocultural aspects of students' identities influence their writing experiences. This report provides information about our aims and initial findings, study procedures and issues, recommendations for future studies, budget usage, and public dissemination of initial results.

Summary

The central aim of the UA Study is to better understand the development of student writing. This research project follows a mixed-method longitudinal research design that investigates student writers' metacognitive practices and affective relationships to writing during their four years of higher education and into their first year after college. The following research questions articulate UA Study's goals:

1. What metacognitive practices of awareness and monitoring do students deploy over time and across multiple domains (genres, rhetorical situations, contents, discourse communities, etc.)?
2. Assuming writers engage in metacognitive practice, how does it emerge in students' writing lives?
3. What sociocultural and affective dimensions become relevant for understanding students' metacognitive practices across multiple domains?

To operationalize these questions, we employed a range of methods in our planned-attrition study. In the first year we collected authentic student writing in Fall 2012 during week 1 of English 101 and in Spring 2013 during week 13 of English 102 (consenting 158 student participants, but scoring all 292 samples). This student data included reflective responses to a six-question prompt immediately after these writing activities, and two surveys of student writing experiences also completed just after these writing assignments. In 2013-2014 of the UA Study, we designed and user-tested an interview protocol and we trained six research fellows to conduct these interviews. The research fellows collected 60 interviews. Each participant also shared a self-selected writing sample from their second year in the study. In year three, which spanned 2014-2015, we collected a range of data from 28 participants, including video logs of students' literacy experiences, two surveys, text blasts, structured interviews, and self-selected writing samples. Now, in year four, we have been able to retain 25 participants and are in the process of collecting survey responses, self-selected writing samples, and structured interviews. As the UA Study

continues, we are building case studies of students and their writing development over five years. These cases will provide data which we will compare to patterns noted in the initial years of data collection. In this way, the data will be contextualized in relationship to the larger student participant pools at key times of the study as well as develop thick descriptions of continued participants' writing development.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The UA Study highlights the importance of "smart data" in longitudinal studies about student writing. Our study makes a concerted effort to add complexity to narratives about student writing by developing smart data through a mixed methods approach that incorporates quantitative and qualitative measures collected through multiple instruments at various points in a student writer's college trajectory. This smart data approach has allowed our team to understand students' writing lives more complexly. Our study demonstrates that an emphasis on students' identities and lives as writers in institutional settings is necessary for a broader understanding of these complex negotiations. Future studies on student writers would benefit from developing smart data by incorporating student voices (through interviews, surveys, etc.), and qualitative and quantitative methods to complement the focus on texts, tasks, process, and product.