

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome to NEXTcast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. On NEXTcast talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber, both inside and outside the classroom. In this episode, we sit down with Jessica Freitag and Jennifer Winfield, both professors in The Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences & Innovative Learning to talk about their teaching innovation fun project on the collaborative writing.

Nathan Whitlock:

So welcome to NEXTcast, Jessica and Jennifer.

Jessica Freitag:

Thank you. Good to be here.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, thank you for coming. I guess I have to ask, how do you both know each other?

Jennifer Winfield:

First we started to know each other by, we work together in the department of English and then we studied together actually as well, so we got to know each other better.

Nathan Whitlock:

Where were you studying?

Jessica Freitag:

We studied at York university a few years ago. We did a master's together in applied linguistics.

Nathan Whitlock:

Oh yeah. And that's all done, you've graduated?

Jessica Freitag:

It's all done now, yes.

Nathan Whitlock:

Congratulations.

Jessica Freitag:

Thank you. We took some courses together so we were able to learn from that and reflect on our teaching as we were doing the program. So it was good.

Nathan Whitlock:

Excellent. How did this come about? This particular project, this Teaching Innovation Fund project on collaborative writing. How did that start?

Jessica Freitag:

So a couple of factors inspired this research. We wanted to test some assumptions that we've had about collaborative writing based on observations that we've made in our classrooms. Jen and I both teach first year college students and in the English department, as Jen mentioned, we teach a course that focuses on reading critical thinking and writing skills to ESL students. So ESL meaning English for speakers of other languages. And the majority of these students are international. They have different cultural educational linguistic backgrounds and we tend to, even though it's not part of the curriculum, we tend to use a pedagogy approach of group writing or group work a lot in our classes. And we just noticed in observing that the students tend to take to it well both enjoyment wise and we tended to notice that the quality of their writing tended to be better, so we just wanted to do some actual testing in terms of research to see if our assumptions came out to be true.

Jennifer Winfield:

I would say a second factor was also our experience as students and doing the masters because we got to collaborate on some of our projects together and both of us before that were sort of hesitant to do collaborative writing. We kind of had an attitude towards writing as being more independent, especially the process of it, but we ended up doing some collaborative writing and both of us came up thinking it was more of a positive process and product than we expected and so we thought if we enjoyed it this much and we got this kind of positive results out of it, we imagined it could only be perhaps beneficial for our English language learners, especially when they're trying to fill in linguistic gaps for each other, et cetera.

Nathan Whitlock:

That's interesting that you came to this, not even so much as teachers, but that as having that student experience and that changed your minds that like, Oh, maybe this, maybe this works after all.

Jennifer Winfield:

I think it was both the teaching and learning. But absolutely, as learners, we absolutely want to explore that as well.

Nathan Whitlock:

So when you made that decision to kind of take a closer look, is this actually working, is this as effective as we think it is, is having the impact that we think it is? What was the process? What were the steps that you went through to get this project off the ground?

Jennifer Winfield:

We both had classes that were the same sections and we had two classes, each of the same sections. So for each of us we had one sort of control group and one class or section that had the experiment on it. So we aligned our lessons so that they were pretty much identical. So the only different thing between us was just whether they were writing in groups or not. For the first assignment, we had one class write in groups and one class write individually. And that was for both Jessica and myself so that we could minimize whether that was teacher or whatever it was. And we had hired external raters, we had trained them about how to grade and so they graded and assessed the papers blind. They didn't know who was individual or who was group and so they arrived at their assessment and they assessed for grammar, for all elements of writing. So content, structure, ideas, development. And then a little bit later in the semester we flipped it.

Nathan Whitlock:

So there wasn't a class that just went through the whole semester or whole year not ever writing in groups. They got-

Jennifer Winfield:

They got the taste. Exactly. And so that was for the quality to, to see if it actually worked in terms of quality. And then for student engagement, we did a survey at the beginning of the semester about what their attitudes towards group writing was. And then we did a survey after they had experienced both the individual and group writing activities.

Nathan Whitlock:

And were they aware during while this was going on that you were doing this as research, that they were part of a study?

Jessica Freitag:

Yes, absolutely. So we did have some people come in from the research team that they gave them the informed consent and all of the students had to give their consent and they knew that they were part of the process. We find that with the students that we teach, the ESL group, they tend to be quite in agreement with that kind of thing. So it was actually a pleasant experience from the research team side too, because they thought, we don't usually get groups this, sometimes people will out for whatever reasons or perhaps not even show up to the classes. But our classes are large. We had a lot of attendance on the assignment days. So we've got a good sample size, which is great.

Jennifer Winfield:

And just to be clear as the external graders marked for the research, we of course still use these as part of the course. We had to mark as well.

Nathan Whitlock:

Yeah, I was going to say this sounds like a clever scheme, training someone else to mark. I see what's going on here...

Jessica Freitag:

We wish.

Nathan Whitlock:

I'm curious when you'd collected all that data, when you had the external people marking and you'd gone through the entire test period of having one group do it and then switch, what was the kind of data you got? What was the results you got?

Jessica Freitag:

So we were actually excited to learn that our hypothesis was confirmed in terms of one of the tasks. So the first test that they did was a summary task and the second one was a critical analysis task. And so our results showed that for the summary task, the group summaries were rated as having higher quality writing than the individuals and that was statistically significant results. We were quite excited to see that our assumptions were not just assumptions in the classroom, but actually the research confirmed it.

As for the critical analysis tests, we were somewhat surprised because those results there were not statistically significant in terms of the quality of writing being higher for the groups. However, once we started to analyze that and think about it, we had some interpretations in terms of why that might be. So normally, anecdotally before the research, we found that complex tasks like a critical analysis would be the types that the students would benefit from a lot because they were helping each other out and helping each other with the understanding of the instructions, et cetera. However, within the conditions of the research, they had a limited amount of time. They were only doing this within the classroom, and the critical analysis task is unlike the summary, it takes more negotiation. There's more decisions to be made. It's a much more complex task. So we think that perhaps they were spending more of the time at the initial stages and if they had had more time than the results might have shown a little bit stronger quality.

Jennifer Winfield:

The results for the students' attitudes towards it. Some of the qualitative data that came back was really interesting as well that of course the students were able to see both the positives and negatives to writing both in groups and individually. But we thought for sure what was really neat was about how they were able to make connections between writing in groups and a lot of the skill development that they needed, not just writing. So it was with writings that they were able to improve grammar and things like that, but also the skill development in terms of conflict resolution, speaking. And they were able to make connections about how this would actually affect them and help in the workplace. And like I said, they also acknowledged that there were some drawbacks and limitations as well.

Jessica Freitag:

Yeah, it was really interesting to see some of the qualitative comments really sort of enrich the data. So we saw from the students coming out and saying, we are all from, working in a group with different cultural backgrounds and different perspectives and understandings of different topics and things and ways of approaching things. It was difficult to work with people that way, but they also recognize that as a positive, and that came out as something that they could learn from each other on.

Jessica Freitag:

And they really recognized it as building communication skills. And I think our students are starting to recognize the importance of that. Not even just in the classroom, not even just in the writing classroom, but if you look at the college space these days across programs and across courses, there's more and more collaboration going on, and that extends to industry as well. So the fact that they were making those connections without having the question actually asking them for that.

Nathan Whitlock:

Leading them to that point.

Jessica Freitag:

Without leading them to that particular kind of answer was really, that was pretty exciting for us.

Nathan Whitlock:

It turned out well and you got a lot of results that you were excited by. Were you at all anxious before you saw the results that there may be a class rebellion on your hands? People would turn on you like,

"This was a waste of time or let us go back to the old way or please don't do that as to us again." Was there any anxiety?

Jennifer Winfield:

Yeah, I mean for definitely because this is a technique that we use in the classroom. I guess the hope was that there were especially positive views and I guess that it did actually show that there was a positive outcome because it's enjoyable. And again, it is a technique that we use. So there was a little bit of anxiety that what if this comes back, that this is actually, that the majority of students don't enjoy this and that it's actually having a negative effect on their writing. So, I guess I didn't want to hear that, but yeah.

Nathan Whitlock:

But luckily, the results were positive.

Jessica Freitag:

Luckily they were, yeah. We could see how they could be even more positive given some different research conditions or the fact that the research conditions are somewhat restrictive. And if we look at the classroom as a natural environment, we can see even more of those positive results.

Nathan Whitlock:

And in terms of what you've taken from this research, not just in terms of doing it and sharing it and presenting it, but actually taking it in as teachers. How have you brought this kind of information and this new knowledge back to the classroom? How have you approached teaching? Have you done anything different? Do you feel you will do anything different knowing these results?

Jessica Freitag:

It was a good reminder that even though we see this as a positive process and experience overall and a lot of the students feel quite engaged and there's a lot of positives to it. But there was that reminder that not every student is satisfied in every way and there are the setbacks. So since the research, I sort of experiment with giving students small stakes tasks early on in the semester with a mandatory individual assignment and a mandatory group assignment and then have them, after those two are completed, have them do a reflection, where they have to really kind of break down what was good about the group work for them and what was good about the individual and what could they learn and how could they have contributed differently to the participation in the group work and different things in terms of how that might help them going forward. And then after that they get to choose from the following assignment whether they want to work in groups or individually. So they've at least had a little chance to think about what works and what doesn't and why.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, the great thing about this research that you've done, that this project you've done, is it hasn't just stayed in the classroom. You've been presenting it externally. You presented at Humber Showcase last summer and you also went to a conference in Winnipeg, I believe, in June to present this. How did that go? What was that experience like?

Jennifer Winfield:

It was positive.

Jessica Freitag:

Very positive.

Jennifer Winfield:

Our colleagues in general recognize the value of this as a teaching technique. Lots of colleagues have questions about how we actually do implement it in the classroom and they've also given us lots of thought about what we can think about for future research areas to explore as well.

Jessica Freitag:

They've had various experiences similar to ours anecdotally, but I think they appreciated also the fact to have some research results that confirm those thoughts.

Jennifer Winfield:

We learned a lot and we had really good support from the research team here that was always on hand. We couldn't have done it without them. We're testing things and we're understanding the research process at a really primary level because we've done a lot of reading about other research and to actually be in it in the thick of it ourselves and then going forward to be able to talk about it with our students in future classes. And so you know, we actually have some data here.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, this has been great. I'm glad we were able to collaborate on this and do some critical thinking in this moment. Thank you so much for both of you for coming here.

Jennifer Winfield:

Thank you very much.

Jessica Freitag:

Thanks a lot.

Nathan Whitlock:

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Nathan Whitlock:

Thanks and see you next time. That is still not a pun.