Web-Enabled Micro Engagement and Improving Linguistically Diverse Community College Student Writing: Web-Enabled Micro Engagement and College Writing Achievement

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ABSTRACT

In debates on institutional approaches to community college developmental instruction, this research examines one form of web-enabled formative assessments and presents a case study conducted in a linguistically-diverse urban community college. The study was designed to examine the multivariate associations between final class average, total user activity, total user activity in hours, and quiz average as measures of formative assessment and college writing achievement. The results of Pearson correlation analysis indicated 6 significant associations between micro engagement, formative assessment, and college writing achievement. Further, micro engagement, time on task, and formative assessment predicted 61% of college writing achievements. This study contributes to the conversation on community college writing instruction by demonstrating that employing multiple risk-free formative assessments provides one path toward college writing achievements.

KEYWORDS

College Writing Achievement, Exhaust Data, Formative Assessment, Linguistically Diverse Students (LDs), Micro Engagement

INTRODUCTION

In the spring term of 2018, the University Heights Community College (UHCC; pseudonym), part of the City University of New York (CUNY), was embroiled in a debate that played out in both the college’s curriculum committee and its college senate over developmental instruction. Developmental courses are non-credit-bearing courses required for students whose skills in math, reading, or writing have been determined, usually through testing, to fall below mandated thresholds; and the college community was divided on whether to offer an experimental section of a developmental English course to combine reading and writing remediation within first-year composition into a single credit-bearing course.

In the fall of 1970, driven partly by protests by students of color (Steinberg, 2018), CUNY colleges adopted an open admissions standard that allowed any student with a high school diploma to attend (Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999). Open admissions resulted in a student population with a
wide variation in academic skills, and CUNY has long employed developmental programs to assist students who need remediation. CUNY’s open admissions approach, however, has also drawn some criticism, most notably from Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) who surmised, using archival data, that CUNY students did not greatly benefit from developmental instruction. Subsequently, Hodara (2012) and Hodara, Jaggars and Karp (2012) highlighted that some CUNY students repeated developmental courses, incurring the expense of paying for non-credit-bearing courses that inhibited continued progress towards degree.

Despite such opposition, CUNY policy has so far held to its support of new language learners and underperforming students—a population for which the authors employ the term Linguistically Diverse students (LDs)—through developmental sequences. In the last decade, however, developmental education has been extensively scrutinized by research-intensive universities, formerly known as Tier I research institutions, whose researchers may have limited experience teaching the types of student populations that they are studying. Attewell et al. (2006) and then research by Columbia’s Teacher College’s Community College Research Center (CCRC) began to build a body of scholarly work that contended that community college developmental education did not equip under-skilled students. Work by Hodara (2012) and other members of CCRC, including Bailey (2009), Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010), Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2011), and Bailey, Jaggars, and Scott-Clayton (2013) continued to report that developmental classes did not support student writing achievement for this specific student demographic. Such research, meant to inform administrative policy decisions, often prioritizes certain metrics of success while undervaluing less straightforward or less quantifiable effects, ultimately positioning developmental instruction as a barrier. Bailey, Jeong and Cho (2010) argued that the very placement of students into developmental courses minimizes their probability of success. The framing of the developmental skill acquisition process as detrimental is a relatively new contention and appears counterintuitive to some in the cohort of instructional staff who have devoted their careers to helping emergent learners.

Prior to the study, the college senate at UHCC had voted down the initiative to comingle developmental writing and first-year composition for some students. Expectations had been that the proposal would easily pass because it involved running only one section of the course and versions of the course had already been implemented as regular offerings at other colleges in the university system. However, in departmental meetings, presentations to the faculty council and college senate, and an open letter to the English department, members of the instructional staff raised concerns about possible threats to open admissions practices. They viewed the proposed course as a gateway to the total elimination of remediation and the unofficial reduction of openness which that would entail; they also worried about the emotional impact on developmental students, who would be expected to accomplish more in less time and with higher stakes.

Decisions such as these demonstrate the complex effects of the mounting scholarly work that strongly opposes developmental courses and the reliance on external experts (like CCRC) in the framing of policies. Kincheloe (2012) and Kincheloe and Tobin (2009) showed how positivistic framings of educational research and supposedly scholarly authorities tend to hold an institutional weight that contradicts real-world, ontological experiences of professionals working on these types of instructional problems. The instructors at UHCC have developed practical solutions and innovative pedagogy to address the specific needs of their population. CCRC’s mainstreaming research (Bailey, 2009; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2011; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010), in contrast, tends to deal in large-scale statistical analysis and applies econometric tools to student achievement, a shift from the pedagogical conversations that had, up until Atwell et al. (2006), dominated the literature. This shift necessarily changes what constitutes educational success and the educational mission more broadly.

Nuanced economic statistical formulations and propensity measurements have their place but do not unproblematically align with the mission of UHCC or tell the whole story of the educational needs of its students. Nonetheless, CCRC’s work seemingly superseded classroom teaching experience in influencing how CUNY determines entry into developmental skills courses. In a memo to chief
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