

Research Paper Reflection and Follow-up

The process of initiating and finalizing my research project was an exceptional journey. Nearly a year in the making, my research is finished and I am left with the responsibility of enacting my own conclusions drawn from the findings. But, before I expound on those findings and future steps, I would like to reflect on the extensive voyage I have taken since beginning my research.

At the start of this project, I had chosen to focus on the topic of academic writing. Throughout my own college career, I have seen the importance of academic writing and its necessity for academic success. Additionally, what qualifies as academic writing and how these qualifications are applied throughout various academic courses can be unclear at times, especially for international students. I have worked with many students in the ESL program at Gonzaga University, and a number of them have returned to ask me for help with their writing. As I continued to work with these graduated ESL students, I saw the struggles they were having in their writing at the university level. Students were particularly challenged by the writing style required for philosophy classes. It was then that I decided I wanted to know the specific requirements for writing in each field. From my own experiences, I knew that writing for history and writing for philosophy obviously differed, but I, myself, couldn't even define the exact academic requirements for each field. This conclusion began the formation of the research I would pursue for the next 11 months.

My initial plans for research were ambitious, to say the least. I had acquired information on major declarations for international students at Gonzaga, conducted interviews with previous ESL students from Gonzaga's program who were now studying at the main campus, as well as select university professors, asking questions about academic writing in their field of study. I also searched the entire Gonzaga website for each field declared by international students to find course or department definitions/requirements for academic writing. These courses entailed a few from humanities, business, and the sciences. Once I had done this, I looked at course requirements to see if I could find any commonalities among the various fields of study. For a majority of them, I was able to find that each field shares multiple courses among the common core requirements (i.e. courses that all students must take, no matter the declaration). Courses listed in the common core include English literature, history, philosophy, religion, and at least one science course. The requirement for philosophy and religion courses reflects Gonzaga's Jesuit beliefs and background. Knowing this, I also took the time to look at Gonzaga's mission statement. It was within the university's mission statement that I found another requirement: critical thinking. The concept of critical thinking in a classroom is no stranger to a native English speaking college student; however, its *exact* implications and definition is usually a mystery to many, especially international students. Defining critical thinking can vary from person to person, and even across various departments; still yet, it is thrown around in conversation and the classroom, but never truly explained. These conclusions I had drawn led me to the creation of a survey that I would administer to the university's undergraduate faculty, and would later analyze and synthesize into succinct content-specific definitions of critical thinking, and academic requirements.

Overall, the survey turned out to be a success. I received 90 completed surveys from a wide variety of professors, including humanities, business, and science departments. It

took many hours to sift through all of the information. Three of the questions were open-ended, which elicited personal definitions of critical thinking and academic writing, in addition to preferred resources needed for working specifically with international students. Despite being able to extrapolate the information I needed, I found myself in an unfortunate predicament. Supplementing the survey data, I had an abundance of data I had previously collected before administering the survey. The interviews I had conducted were recorded, but I still had not transcribed them. I had so much information that I felt like I was being drowned by it all. In addition to the insurmountable amount of data, I began to experience some health issues that, unbeknownst to me, would continue to worsen and inhibit my academic progress. By the end of the spring semester, I was unable to finish my research and needed to take an incomplete for the class. Over the summer and following fall semester, I struggled to finalize the research and continue with my other classes. It wasn't until the beginning of the next spring semester that I had enough strength, gumption, and clarity to finish the research, just in time to present it at the 2015 Spokane Regional ESL Conference.

Due to physical and time constraints, I decided to narrow my research down to the subject of critical thinking, in light of academic writing. Critical thinking is an important concept for any student to be aware of, and the information I had gathered from the survey gave me ample data in regards to this topic. After fully analyzing the data, the findings and conclusions drawn from them pointed to strong connections between teacher expectations in writing and critical thinking, and what writing skills teachers perceived students to be lacking in. These findings have been applied to the ESL classroom in efforts to find ways to incorporate university expectations into the curriculum. By doing so, I believe ESL students will have a better understanding of what is expected from them when they enroll in academic courses, and may have a slightly easier transition into their studies. Thankfully, I have the opportunity to apply this research to my own classroom. I have been hired as an adjunct faculty member at the Spokane Falls Community College and will be teaching a reading and writing intensive bridge course for international students. Teaching this class will not only give me the opportunity to pilot my own suggestions, but to also collect more data and continue with action research.

Now finished with the project, I am still left with a great deal of data that may be used for future and continued research. If I were to do this again, I would narrow my focus from the very beginning. I was driven by good ideas, but, in the grand scheme of what was required, my sights were much further than they needed to be. Had I begun with the concept of critical thinking in the beginning, I more than likely would have been able to finish the project on time. However, if I had done that, I would have gained an entirely different skew of data. Hindsight favors the thought of a new approach to the research, but, in the end, I'm not sure if I would really want to change anything at all. Although I was not able to use all of the data I accumulated, I do anticipate expanding on and continuing this research with the remaining findings. There is much to be explored with the survey responses regarding the definition of academic writing, interviews with international students about their experiences with academic writing, their struggles and successes, and personal opinions about making a smoother transition from an ESL program to a university.

While Gonzaga University was my specific target, I would like to administer the same survey and possibly conduct some interviews with multiple academic institutions in

the state of Washington. My hope in this is to find specific differences and commonalities among the various institutions and apply those expectations to the TESOL field. My fortified ambition beckons me to broaden the search, eventually, in years to come, duplicating this research by region throughout the United States. I would also like to form a handbook or a few resources for university professors to refer to when working with international students. The comments from survey participants in regards to possible resources displayed a need and desperation for this, in addition to a need for professors to be educated on the plight international students undergo when attending a university in the United States. However, if I want to continue this research and begin applying it to the classroom, I must remain local.

With the college's permission, I would like to administer this survey to faculty members of Spokane Falls Community College. The academic atmosphere and setting between Spokane Falls Community College and Gonzaga University differ; therefore, I would like to explore any specific differences between the two that would alter the execution of my prior findings. In regards to working with international students, the needs of the professors at the college may also differ. As a result, after administering the survey, I would like to begin working on the handbook and various resources for college and university professors.

As I begin my teaching career in Spokane, I hope to maintain the curiosity and drive that has brought me to this point. This research project definitely challenged me physically and academically. Despite the whirlwinds I experienced, I am most appreciative and proud of the work I have accomplished, the support shown to me by the MA/TESL faculty and staff, and the opportunities I have been blessed with. I hope to leave a lasting impression in my Master's program and proudly reflect the education, opportunities, and viewpoints Gonzaga has impressed upon me.