

EDTC 809 – Project 3

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Description of the Study

An area that deserves to be looked into is the implementation of educational technology into college writing centers. Many studies have been conducted on individual software or programs, and the majority of these studies show that educational technology in the writing center is of great help to students, but these studies are often limited to one small sample at a given college and almost always rely on quantitative data, not taking students' perceptions into account, such as Proudfoot (2016) and Wood, Grant, Gottardo, and Evans (2016). There are even fewer studies that address writing center administrator's perceptions, especially in the area of technology. Current best practices in college writing centers neglect to discuss the educational technology in use, focusing more on the training of tutors and pen and paper approaches.

This study will look at the current best practices of technology implementation in college-level writing centers. Because of the vast differences in student populations and budgets at writing centers, this will be a qualitative look and what writing center administrators view as what works best for them, with their own populations and budgeting, along with what they find beneficial, what they find does not work as well as it should, and what they would like to see offered in future technologies.

A series of interviews and open-ended questions will be used to elicit each administrator's view on what they perceive as a best practice when it comes to technology in writing centers in general, and their writing center in particular. The answers to all interviews and open-ended questions will then be coded to tease out themes and be analyzed to determine what best practices have emerged from their responses.

Participants

This study will select participants using purposeful sampling. Up to eighteen writing center administrators will be contacted either through email or via telephone to ask about their interest in participating in this study. Centers will be chosen based on their standing with professional tutoring organizations, such as the National Tutoring Association (NTA), Association for the Coaching and Tutoring Professional (ACTP), the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA), and the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). As an example, writing centers at the following locations fit the criteria: Allegheny College (PA), Borough of Manhattan Community College (NY), Hudson County Community College (NJ), Fairleigh Dickinson University (NJ), Middlesex Community College (NJ), Rockland Community College (NY), and William Paterson University (NJ). My plan is to include colleges outside of this geographical area as well and I may contact colleges in Florida, Texas, and Arizona as well as other states.

Potential issues that may arise include participants either not willing to take part in this study or simply being unavailable to take part. By stating that up to eighteen writing center administrators will be contacted, even if six of them are unable to take part (33%), I will still have an appropriate amount of participants (Creswell, 2013). Another issue is conducting the interview. While I would like to conduct these face-to-face, there are many logistical issues that may prevent this and force me to rely on a system such as Skype to conduct this part of my research.

Research Questions

These are the following research questions that I will seek to answer:

Q1: What do Writing Center Administrators perceive as being the best practices in terms of educational technology implementation into their writing centers?

Q2: How have Writing Center Administrators seen technology as being beneficial to their students at their writing centers, if at all?

Q3: What kinds of future educational technology functionalities would Writing Center Administrators view as the most important for writing center assistance?

The Need of this Study

Bielinska-Kwapisz (2015) writes that almost 45% of students in their first two years of college “demonstrated no significant improvement in a range of skills including critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing” (p. 382). She goes on to state that there is, however, a “direct relationship between rigor and gains in learning: students whose classes reflected high expectations – more than 40 pages of reading each week and more than 20 pages of writing each semester” (p. 382). Therefore, writing at the college level is directly linked to gains in learning.

Lerner (2019) states that while writing centers themselves are extremely valuable, as data has consistently shown, there is not a great amount of research devoted to them. He then goes on to write that

Christina Murphy, also both a past-president of the National Writing Centers Association and a widely published scholar on writing center–related topics, infamously declared in her talk at the national conference that writing center research was, essentially, “bankrupt” (p. 458).

Murphy’s argument, and Lerner’s as well, is that there is little “big picture” research currently being done on this important aspect of college learning. Many studies focus only on student outcomes, which of course are important, but may lack nuance. Grades are ultimately seen as the last word in student achievement, but the confidence that is built up in a student is much more difficult to gauge. Perhaps even more difficult to express is what the writing center administrator

sees in the students, as they are often the ones who watch the growth of a student of the course of a single semester or even years.

Qualitative Study

This research will use a qualitative approach to the study. Studies such as Gibson Jr., Cartledge, Keyes, and Yawn (2014) have shown a positive correlation between literacy software and improved student performance. My particular interest is in the views of the administrators who are tasked with running the writing centers. While there is a great amount of data that can be combed through and quantified, perceptions of student performance, by the very people who are tasked to assist them, may not always match up. Since these administrators are at the front lines of higher education literacy assistance, and there has yet to be a clear notion of best practices in writing center educational technology implementation, these administrators views are important for defining what those best practices currently are as well as where they are heading in the future.

Description of Questions

These are a sample of questions that may be used for this study to fully answer the aforementioned research questions:

1. What type/s of technology do you use in your writing center?
2. How have you observed students use technology in your writing center? What type of feedback have students given you about the technology?
3. Which technology or technologies, from what you have seen, have assisted students the most?
4. Are there technologies that you have discontinued using? If yes, why did you discontinue using them?

5. Do you feel students gravitate to a specific technology? Do they specifically look for one technology instead of another?
6. Do you feel any functionalities currently included are not needed? Do you feel any of the functionalities currently included are underutilized?
7. What functionalities, in the technology that you currently use, do you view as being the most beneficial?
8. What future functionalities would you like to see implemented moving forward?
9. What do you consider “best practices” in implementing and using writing center technology?
10. Which of these “best practices” do you consider the most important? Why?

References

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