

Mini-Grant Project: Evaluation Report

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Project Date: Fall '07 – Spr '08

Description

The Duke Reader Project, an initiative of the Writing in the Disciplines Program, offers students the opportunity to get feedback on a class writing project from someone outside the classroom setting who has professional experience relevant to their project. Hearing how these volunteers respond to their written work can help our students learn to anticipate the expectations and needs of readers and to revise their writing to make it more effective for the intended audience.

The Reader Project began by bringing undergraduates who were writing health-science related papers together with researchers and clinicians from the Health System side of Duke. In 2008, we sought to offer this kind of experience to students in other fields. In order to find volunteers with a broad range of professional experiences, the Writing in the Disciplines program began collaborating with the Office of Alumni Affairs. In 2008, the Reader Project brought students in chemistry, economics, writing, and history courses together with Duke alumni who gave the students feedback on drafts of their written work.

The 2008 pilot project was designed for students and alumni to have three main interactions: First, each student-alumni group (some students were co-authoring papers with classmates) had a web conference to get to know one another and to discuss the aim and scope of the student project. Later in the term, once the students had composed a coherent draft of their paper, they e-mailed a copy to the alumni reader who gave a type of feedback called a “think-aloud response.” This was a digital recording in which the alumnus read the student paper (or parts of the paper) aloud, pausing to insert comments about their reaction to what they read. The students then revised their paper with the reader’s comments in mind, and the group had a second web conference to discuss the revised draft.

Challenges/lessons learned

The two major issues involved soliciting alumni and issues with the IT for some users. We were a bit disappointed with the number of alumni volunteers who responded, although most of those who did were very enthusiastic. The folks at Alumni Affairs had predicted a much greater response than we got. (About 50 alumni volunteered; we were able to match about 20 with students given the various areas of expertise and the nature of the student projects. We believe that a generic invitation coming from Alumni Affairs may not be the most effective way to solicit alumni, since many alumni don’t read such mail.

The communications technology was a mixed success in a number of ways. The audio part—having alumni record responses using the Wimba tools on Blackboard—seems to have worked with few problems and we received quite positive reports from both alumni and students on the value of this kind of feedback.

The results for the webcams were more complex. Some users reported no problems getting webcams working or getting Skype accounts, while I personally worked at some length with others to troubleshoot problems or clear up confusion. Some users felt the video aspect was unnecessary and that they could have accomplished the same thing by phone; others, in contrast, reported that the webcam conferences added a meaningful sense of connection between student

and alumnus. In interpreting these comments, we need to remember that many of the alumni are not very comfortable with contemporary IT in general, and the difficulty required to get the webcams operating may have overshadowed the benefits; it's not clear whether they would feel the same lack of enthusiasm if they were to use the webcams again in subsequent semesters now that they have the system working. That said, *not* using only audio technology would offer both economic and logistical advantages in the near term. (I expect that video conferencing will be more common and simpler in a few years.)

Finally, using Blackboard as the hub of interaction did not work well. Our intention was to have all information and files go through Blackboard so we could collect data on whether and when participants completed the various steps during the term. But many participants avoided Blackboard and just interacted by phone or e-mail. In addition to complications they experienced, I had to spend a fair amount of time obtaining and troubleshooting alumni Net IDs.

Future Plans

We are planning to run the project a second time in Spring 2009. We hope to involve about eight different classes, including new courses and some of the same courses from spring 2008. (Some instructors have already expressed interest in doing this again.) At this point we are planning to make these changes or think through these issues:

1. Eliminate the use of Blackboard except for the use of Wimba for recording the think-aloud responses. For that use we will consider having a single NetID and password for all alumni to use, and develop a simple Blackboard site that has only a single page with the Wimba voice board. Although we like the idea of having a window into student-alumni interactions, having them use phone and e-mail each other directly is more efficient. We will also use the FORWARD option on the voice board so that the alumni can send the students a link to their recorded response as soon as it is done.
2. We're considering whether to have the webcams be optional. We hope to secure tech support for all project technology for both alumni and students.
3. In our first version, three different ways of matching alumni and students within a class were used: random, student selected, and instructor selected. We need to think through the merits of each for various contexts and think about how to make this as efficient as possible without sacrificing flexibility.
4. Although most alumni did think aloud responses (and students responded vary favorably to what they received), some alumni employed other feedback modes. We need to decide how much we should push the think aloud response.
5. We will look into having individual departments send out requests to their alumni for volunteers. We think this may get more responses than the generic approach we tried this spring.