Improving academic writing of AUC students by optimizing instructional design

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Introduction

At Amsterdam University College (AUC), students majoring in diverse fields in the Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities all take the same two academic writing courses. While there are sound philosophical and practical reasons for this approach, in practice problems do occur. Thus, “does one size fit all” is the nagging question that prompted this project.

This project first set out to investigate how students from the three majors at AUC perform with regard to various aspects of academic writing in the course Advanced Research Writing (RQ1). Specifically, it sought to identify disciplinary differences in academic writing performance. Preliminary results suggested there are few differences in academic writing performance between students of different majors, but also revealed that many students regardless of their major struggled with four key aspects of academic writing: structure and organization, argument and analysis, referencing, and conclusions. Consequently, small-scale teaching interventions in these four areas were developed and implemented in order to improve students’ performance in those areas (RQ2). The effects of these teaching interventions are currently being measured.

Material & Methods

This project employed a mixed methods approach to address the two main research aims, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze students’ writing performance, and design-based interventions to improve it.

1. Disciplinary differences in academic writing performance

- Quantitative analysis of 8 teachers’ assessments of 173 students, divided over 9 groups.
- Content analysis of a multistage sample of 21 student papers from all 3 majors and biomedical students.

2. Design-based interventions to improve writing performance

- Based on results on RQ1, four areas of improvement were identified, and teaching interventions were developed and implemented to address those areas of improvement.
- The effects of the interventions were measured as under [1].

Results

1. Disciplinary differences in academic writing performance

- Quantitative and content analyses revealed few significant disciplinary *differences*, except that biomedical student tended to outperform all other students.
- Content analysis also revealed several *commonly shared* areas for improvement (structure and organization, argument and analysis, referencing, and conclusions).

2. Design-based interventions to improve writing performance

- Analysis of difference scores between experimental and non-experimental groups showed that the experimental group achieved *less growth* between midterm and final assignment than the non-experimental group.
- Content analysis is still ongoing, but so far no clear signs of improvement in experimental group (also facing some methodological challenges here).

(Preliminary) Conclusion

Contrary to expectations, there are few significant *differences* in academic writing performance between students of different disciplinary orientations; there are numerous *commonly shared writing challenges* though. Also, there is some evidence that teachers grade students with a similar disciplinary orientation as their own more strictly than other students; this finding requires further investigation.

So far, the interventions have not had measurable effects. The interventions as such may have had limitations; the methodology employed, moreover, also has limitations.

Teaching & Learning Centre

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