

Running Head: SELF-ASSESSMENT AND TUTORING

HOW DOES SELF-ASSESSMENT IMPACT WRITING CENTER TUTORING
SESSIONS?

by

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Abstract

Some students at a Midwest university experience problems with college-level writing, leading the university and many departments to support programs to help students with writing. In order to provide students with a department specific option the department created the Academic Resource Center (ARC). Since the ARC is only in its second year, practices are being developed that can best meet the needs of the professors and students in the department. One problem the tutor faces during tutoring sessions is determining what writing guide errors require more or less explanation. Student self-assessment may help the tutor judge what errors students have already identified, allowing the tutor to focus more on those errors students did not mark on their papers during the tutoring session. This study seeks to determine the effects of self-assessment on a tutoring session in an attempt to solidify writing center practices. This study attempted to answer how self-assessment before a tutoring session affects students' rubric scores and if there is a difference between students' self-assessment skills based on grade-level.

Twenty-one students ranging in grade level participated in this action research study. Eleven students did not read their paper before assigning a grade to it and ten students did read their papers before assigning a grade to the paper. Though completing the survey, regardless of reading the paper directly before it or not, is a form of self-assessment, for this study self-assessment applies to the student reading the paper before filling out the survey. After the student completed the survey, the tutor provided advice and suggestions to improve the paper. Both students' drafts and final, edited copies of the same paper were scored using a rubric, which scored students' papers based on mechanics/grammar, organization, paragraph construction, citation format, and having a clear, supported thesis. Students detailed their grade level, strengths and weaknesses of the paper, and self-assigned overall grade for the paper using a paper-pencil survey. The

researcher discovered a significant difference between upperclassmen and underclassmen's abilities to assess their papers' overall grade. However, the effect of self-assessment on students' rubric scores was inconclusive.

Introduction

Background and Significance

Writing is a significant part of communication, and therefore, a necessary skill for students to master, especially in higher education institutions. However, many beginning students in universities and colleges struggle with basic academic writing skills. Though writing has become more common in contemporary everyday life through the use of texting, blogging, emailing, and social media, students are not using or learning formal writing skills, necessary for the workplace, in these communication spheres.

Contemporary students may practice more free-time writing than their predecessors; however, many present-day students do not know how to write an academic paper. To combat this trend, many colleges and universities across the United States have implemented, or supported ideas present in the program Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) (Lillis, 2001). WAC became a popular pedagogy in the 1980s as a way to teach writing skills and allow students to learn the ways writing can vary across disciplines (Wells, 2012). However, WAC, or at least practices that WAC supports, are still common in many contemporary university curriculums. WAC helps make students aware of the different writing styles and requirements throughout the different disciplines, allowing students to realize English classes are not the only place students may be required to write. Requiring cross-discipline writing encourages students to improve their writing skills regardless of their career plans because students are shown the role of writing in a diverse amount of disciplines. For example, an engineering major may believe she does not need to master writing skills, but the ideas present in WAC emphasize engineering professors requiring her to practice writing assignments she will most likely use in the engineering field (Peterson, 2008).

WAC, remedial writing courses, and writing centers emerged in response to many higher-education students' confusion on how to write academically. Many students in higher-education know they need to complete specific requirements to write academically; however, many students do not know what those requirements are specifically. Though professors may provide requirements, or tutors may reference conventions, for a successful academic paper, many of the writing conventions are discussed as if students have prior knowledge of the conventions. A tutor may say that the student needs to make his or her thesis stronger, but the student may not have a working knowledge of what is required for a strong thesis. Some students in higher education were not introduced to these terms in their secondary education classes, requiring universities to provide supplemental writing instruction and support. Many universities have promoted WAC, as well as required students to take a general composition course, as a means of teaching the basic requirements for an academic paper. Writing centers have also become common features that help basic writers learn about academic writing. Writing centers provide one-on-one writing support, which allows writing center tutors to modify sessions to meet the diverse needs of university students (Lillis, 2001 and Peterson, 2008).

A university department in the Midwest created the Academic Resource Center (ARC) to aid students within the department with writing papers. Students are able to schedule appointments at the ARC during any stage of the writing process, from topic selection to editing drafts. Editing drafts for writing guide errors is the most common reason students visit the ARC; however, writing guide errors are specific to each professor in the department. The professors' individual writing guides usually detail specific grammar, style, citation formatting, and organization requirements necessary for a successful paper. Most ARC appointments last fifteen to thirty minutes. In these appointments the tutor reads the paper, marks corrections, explains how to correct the

errors to the student, and answers any questions the student may have about the assignment. Due to the limited amount of time available for appointments, a way to determine students' prior knowledge of writing guide errors may help the appointment run more efficiently. Implementing self-assessment into the tutoring session may be a way to determine students' prior knowledge, allowing the tutor to focus on writing guide errors students did not notice when they self-assessed their papers. As the ARC is only in its second year, a clear practice is still being developed. This study seeks to discover the benefits of self-assessment during a tutoring session and perhaps decide on a writing center practice. A combination of surveys, observations of tutoring sessions, and evaluations of student artifacts will be used during this project.

Conceptual /Theoretical Underpinnings

Since the early 1900s, higher education institutions have reported using writing centers. However, it was not until the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that they became an important and significant part of higher-education culture. The Higher Education Act of 1965 authorized the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to collect data relating to “institutional characteristics, institutional prices, enrollment, student financial aid, degrees and certificates conferred, student persistence and success, and institutional human and fiscal resources” from “institutions that participate in or are applicants for participation in any federal student financial aid program” (Institute of Education, 2012). IPEDS encouraged data collection and statistics as a measure of an institution's success, which led to an increased focus on student retention rates and student programs that promoted student engagement with the university, and thus improved student retention. This new emphasis on retention rates, coupled with high dropout rates in the 1990s, led many universities across the United States to implement

social and academic programs, like writing centers, in order to improve retention rates and student engagement (Bell, 2012).

A common philosophy among writing centers is “work with the writer, not the writing” (Robinson, 2009, 71). Many writing centers follow this philosophy as a way to promote higher-order writing skills that students can use on future papers, not simply focusing on how to improve the current paper. This writing center pedagogy does not lend itself to correcting students’ basic grammar and punctuation, or lower-order writing skills. An important feature of the ARC, as laid out by the department, is the inclusion of grammar and punctuation corrections in tutoring sessions. Though this policy may not seem to comply with the higher-order thinking goals of many writing centers, some writing center pedagogy suggests teaching students lower-order writing skills can ultimately help improve higher-order writing skills. If students have a successful experience when they visit the writing center for lower-order writing skills, then they are more likely to return to the writing center, allowing the tutor to help students improve their higher-order writing skills. With multiple appointments students are able to focus on their writing skills as a whole; however, attracting students by offering lower-order writing skills gives the tutor time to promote higher-order writing skills (Robinson, 2009).

Self-assessment is an important skill for all students, but especially higher-education students. The ability of higher-education students to self-assess their work is crucial for success in university courses as well as professional careers. By employing self-assessment in tutoring sessions, writing centers cannot only teach writing, but also focus on the transferable skill of self-assessment. Self-assessment helps to develop, or improve, students’ metacognition, a vital skill for student success. Self-assessment is used as a viable method of assessment for students of all ages, from early childhood to adult education classes (Lew, 2010).

Statement of the problem

Developing strong writing skills is necessary for success in college as well as after graduation. The Academic Resource Center (ARC) was created in order to provide assistance to all students in the department with writing skills relevant to the department. Though independent proofreading, or self-assessment, is an important part of the writing process, many students do not seem to be practicing this step before attending the tutoring session, leading to high amounts of writing guide errors. However, the tutor cannot definitively determine if the student has self-assessed their paper or not. Since the tutor is unable to determine if students do not recognize the errors in their papers the tutor has to explain corrections for multiple writing guide errors. If students were required to practice self-assessment in the tutoring session then more time could be spent on errors students clearly do not understand. If a student was required to read through their paper and mark errors, the tutor might then be able to focus on the errors the student did not see, and perhaps improve the effectiveness of the session.

Purpose of the study.

Students may attend a tutoring session at the ARC during any stage of the writing process; however, most students request help with editing grammar errors. The tutor reads through the paper, marking errors, and then works with the student to correct the errors. Since the program is only in its second year, a clear practice and philosophy is being developed. During the 2011-2012 school year students' specific issues were recorded and writing guide errors was one of the most common issues the tutor observed. Using self-assessment in a tutoring session was a common practice found after researching different writing center philosophies. The ARC needs to determine whether practicing self-assessment during the tutoring session improves students' final paper scores.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How does self-assessment before a tutoring session affect students' rubric scores?

RQ2: Is there a difference between students' self-assessment skills based on grade-level?

Definition of terms:

Self-Assessment: When a student evaluates their own work; in this study students are reading and evaluating their papers based on their specific professor's writing guide requirements.

Writing Guide: A description of the necessary grammar, style, organization, and formatting requirements students must follow for a successful paper.

Summary

Some students at a Midwest university experience problems with college-level writing, leading the university and many departments to support programs to help students in this area. In order to provide students with a department specific option the ARC was created. Since the ARC is only in its second year the tutor is developing practices that can best meet the needs of the students and professors in the department. One problem the tutor faces during tutoring sessions is determining what writing guide errors require more or less explanation. Student self-assessment may help the tutor judge what errors students have already identified, allowing the tutor to focus more on those errors students did not mark on their paper during the tutoring session. This study seeks to determine the effects of self-assessment on a tutoring session in an attempt to solidify writing center practices.

Literature Review

Writing center philosophies

Thanks to new educational policies implemented during the later-half of the 1960s, writing centers have become an important part of post-secondary writing education. As writing centers became more common in post-secondary institutions, diverse philosophies arose (Bell and Frost, 2012). One of the most common philosophies emphasizes ideas such as limiting writing on students' papers and ultimately focusing on improving the skills of the writer instead of simply fixing the issues present in the student's paper. This philosophy's goal is to target higher-order thinking skills that students can use with future writing assignments (Robinson, 2009). Another philosophy, detailed in Heather M. Robinson's study (2009), argues that higher-order thinking skills can be promoted by helping students correct basic grammar and other lower-level writing skills. Robinson (2009) details how helping students with basic writing skills encourages students to return to the writing center in the future, which gives tutors more time to help students develop their higher-order thinking skills. Regardless of the philosophy used, writing centers can supplement teacher instruction by providing more specific, individualized, and tailored writing instruction not feasible in large classrooms (Turner, 2006). Though self-assessment can be used as a practice regardless of the philosophy enacted by the writing center, instructors and researchers must note the diverse ways to use self-assessment, the benefits of self-assessment, and the factors that influence the use of self-assessment.

Ways to use self-assessment

Regardless of the philosophy used, self-assessment can be implemented in writing instruction. There are many different ways to use self-assessment when teaching writing skills without too much extra classroom time or work for teachers, allowing for teachers to easily incorporate self-assessment into the classroom. Teachers can require students to

solely practice individual self-assessment, meaning students are required to self-assess their own papers and then make corrections. This strategy can be a one-time occurrence or be implemented multiple times for a paper. The key is the teacher needs to provide directions on how students should assess their paper. An additional component to this type of self-assessment can be a teacher or tutor evaluation to supplement students' own self-assessment results (Lindblom-Ylänne, 2006). Another way self-assessment can be introduced is by using both self-assessment and peer-assessment. This form of assessment allows students to self-assess their own work, but also practice assessing other individuals' papers. Teachers can compare students' self-assessment scores to their peer-assessment scores as a way to compare accuracy of the assessments or the addition of a peer-assessment can simply be another resource for students to use to improve their writing (Cassidy, 2007). A third way self-assessment can be taught is by combining self-assessment, peer-assessment, and tutor or teacher-assessment. The important aspect of this form of assessment is that all of the assessments are completed individually. For example, the teacher can more accurately assess the student's paper if they do so without reviewing the student's self-assessment or the peer-assessment of the paper (Bose, 2009).

Benefits of self-assessment in tutoring sessions

Like the writing center philosophies mentioned above, using self-assessment in writing center tutoring sessions helps to promote higher-order thinking skills by requiring students to analyze their paper and use the skills they have learned about writing well. It can also be an efficient way for tutors to judge students' prior knowledge and understanding of writing concepts (Robinson, 2009). A third benefit of self-assessment is it helps to increase students' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a student's belief that they can successfully accomplish something. If students feel like they can succeed at

writing, and if they have self-efficacy about the self-assessment process, then they will view self-assessment activities as a more worthwhile activity and the students will learn more from the activity (Artino, 2012). Perhaps the most important benefit self-assessment can provide is the improvements made to students' overall writing skills. Writing is an important skill students can and will use in many of their classes, regardless of the subject, as well as in their future career. Teaching students self-assessment skills provides them with better writing skills they can use in other classes and, more importantly, in their future careers (Robinson, 2009).

Factors that influence the use of self-assessment

Though there are many benefits to students developing self-assessment skills, there are a few factors which influence the success of self-assessment instruction and, by relation, studies of self-assessment. A student's grade level impacts their prior knowledge of writing skill requirements as well as their self-efficacy. In relation to the grade level, the amount of practice using self-assessment affects the success of using self-assessment. If students are introduced to the concept of self-assessment at a young age and required to use their skills through secondary school, then as university students they will be more successful with using self-assessment (Artino, 2012). Another factor that affects students' success with using self-assessment is if instructors provide clear directions and a rubric or not. If students understand what makes a paper well written, which the rubric can help with, then they usually assess their papers more accurately (Lindblom-Ylänne, 2006). Finally, possessing competency in the material students are writing about helps encourage self-efficacy, and by relation, improves students' use of self-assessment (Cassidy, 2007).

Research Design

The tutor at the ARC has trouble determining what writing guide errors students can identify on their own and what errors they cannot, because the tutor is unable to determine if some students have proofread their papers before coming to the session. This action research project seeks to determine the benefits of self-assessment in a tutoring session using simple descriptive research with a correlational design, as well as some aspects of quasi-experimental research. The goal of the research is to identify the role of self-assessment in a tutoring session and examine the relationship between grade level and students' self-assessed scores for their papers. Though the study is not random, there is a control group and a treatment group. Students who do not self-assess their paper by reading it before completing the survey will make up the control group, and the treatment group will include those students who did practice self-assessment by reading their paper before completing the survey in the tutoring sessions.

This research will be composed of a sample of convenience because only students who attended the ARC with completed papers will be used. The population will include student who seek tutoring at the ARC and will vary in grade level from freshman to senior higher-education students. The prior knowledge of academic writing conventions for each student will vary, as well as students' major area of study. These differences will affect students' experiences with the department content and thus their self-efficacy with the department's academic writing style and requirements. Those students who have not taken classes in the department before will not be as familiar with department writing conventions as students who have already taken classes in the department.

Descriptive, achievement, and perceptive data will be collected in this study and will include both quantitative and qualitative data. The descriptive and perceptive data that will be collected, regardless of if the student is in the control or treatment group, includes: what

the student thinks his/her overall grade for the paper is, why the student assigned that grade, what the student believes is the strongest and weakest part of his/her paper, and the student's grade level. This data will be collected using a pen and paper survey during the tutoring session. The control group will fill out the survey before discussing the tutor's evaluation of the paper, whereas, the treatment group will read through their paper, marking writing guide errors, the student will then fill out the survey, and finally the tutor's evaluation will be shared with the student. The survey questions will provide the researcher with qualitative data about what students view as important for determining a grade and what strengths and weaknesses students listed about their papers. The quantitative data provided by the survey will be the student's overall letter-grade assessment of their paper.

The achievement and quantitative data that will be collected is the tutor's rubric evaluations of the student's draft and the final paper. The rubric will grade students' organization, paragraph construction, thesis strength, citations, and grammar conventions on a scale of one to four. An overall score of four indicates an A, an overall score of three a B, an overall score of two a C, and an overall score of one a D grade. An F grade would only be achieved if a student's paper was not completed; however, for the validity of this study only completed papers (i.e. introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs complete) will be used for the control or treatment groups.

Microsoft Excel will be used to calculate, organize, and graph the data collected. The research will compare students' grade levels to their ability to accurately self-assess and/or evaluate their papers. The research will compare students' ability to accurately identify an overall grade for their paper in both the control and the treatment groups. Also, students' rubric scores, both the pre- and post-scores for both groups, will also be analyzed to determine if using self-assessment affected students' overall rubric score.

Finally, students' comments to the qualitative survey questions will be classified, allowing the researcher to identify students' accuracy on these statements, as compared to the rubric scores for similar categories, and what students deem important when determining a grade for an academic paper. An Executive Report will detail the results and explanations of these comparisons.

Executive Report

Project summary

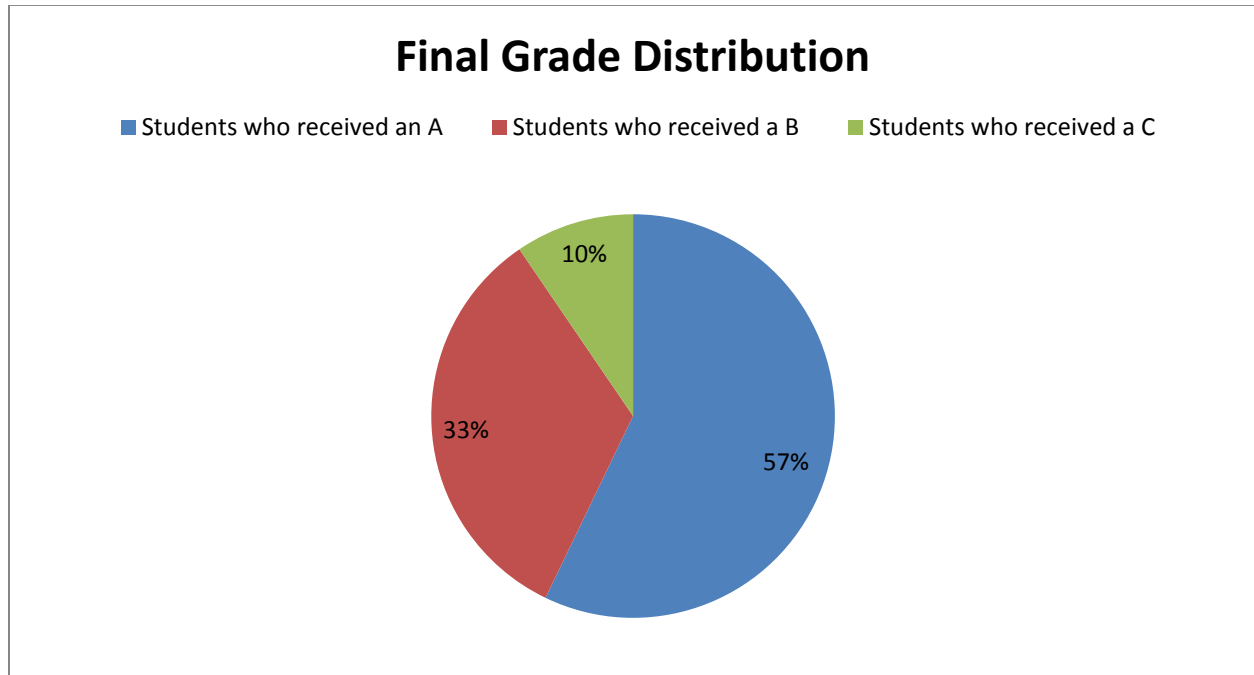
Some students at a Midwest university experience problems with college-level writing, leading the university and many departments to support programs to help students with writing. In order to provide students with a department specific option the department created the Academic Resource Center (ARC). Since the ARC is only in its second year the tutor is developing practices that can best meet the needs of the professors and students in the department. One problem the tutor faces during tutoring sessions is determining what writing guide errors require more or less explanation. Student self-assessment may help the tutor judge what errors students have already identified, allowing the tutor to focus more on those errors students did not mark on their papers during tutoring sessions. This study seeks to determine the effect of self-assessment on a tutoring session in an attempt to solidify writing center practices. This study attempted to answer how self-assessment before a tutoring session impacts students' rubric scores and if there is a difference between students' self-assessment skills based on grade-level.

Twenty-one students ranging in grade level participated in this action research study. Eleven students did not read their paper before assigning a grade to it and ten students did read their papers before assigning a grade to the paper. Though completing the survey, regardless of reading the paper directly before it or not, is a form of self-assessment, for this study self-assessment applies to students who read their paper before filling out the survey. After the students in both groups completed the survey, the tutor provided advice and suggestions to improve their papers. Both students' drafts and final, edited, copies of the paper were scored using a rubric, which scored students' papers based on mechanics/grammar, organization, paragraph construction, citation format, and having a clear, supported thesis. Students detailed their grade, strengths and weaknesses

of their paper, and self-assigned an overall grade for the paper using a paper-pencil survey.

Findings

Students' final rubric scores improved regardless of adding self-assessment. Based on these results, research question one does not have a definitive answer, except that all students who attended the ARC for tutoring kept the same grade or improved their grade on the final rubric. All students scored at least a C on the final rubric with most receiving an A (57%) or a B (33%). About 10% of the students in the study received a C on the final rubric. The pie chart below visually presents these findings.



However, the data did suggest self-assessment does have an influence on students' ability to accurately judge their own paper's grade, especially for underclassmen. The study supported an affirmative answer to research question two; a student's grade level does influence his or her ability to correctly evaluate his or her paper. For this study, underclassmen are defined as students classified as a freshmen or sophomore, whereas, upperclassmen are those students classified as either a junior or a senior. Underclassmen

who self-assessed their papers by reading through the paper before completing the survey, were more likely to assign the correct overall grade. 67% of underclassmen who read their papers before completing the survey accurately assigned their overall grade, as opposed to a 20% accuracy rate for the underclassmen who did not read their papers immediately before completing the survey, a difference of 47%. Upperclassmen in both groups had a 50% success rate, 50% evaluated their paper correctly and 50% did not, in both groups. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 show the raw data gathered during the survey before computing the percentages previously discussed.

Table 1.1: Students Who Read Their Papers During the Session

Grade Level	Student-Assigned Grade	Rubric Score of Draft	Rubric Score of Final Paper
Freshmen	B	B	A
Sophomore	A	A	A
Freshmen	B	C	C
Freshmen	B	B	A
Freshmen	A	A	A
Freshmen	C	D	C
Junior	B	B	A
Junior	B	A	A
Senior	C	B	B
Junior	B	B	A

Table 1.2: Students Who Did Not Read Their Papers During the Session

Grade Level	Student-Assigned Grade	Rubric Score of Draft	Rubric Score of Final Paper
Junior	C	A	A
Junior	C	C	B
Junior	B	B	B
Junior	C	A	A
Junior	A	A	A
Junior	B	A	A
Sophomore	C	D	B
Freshmen	B	C	B
Sophomore	B	C	A
Freshmen	B	C	B
Sophomore	C	C	B

The upperclassmen in both groups who did not accurately assess the overall grade for their papers all assigned a lower grade than the tutor's rubric assessment. In contrast to the upperclassmen results, the underclassmen in both cases who did not correctly assess their overall grade assigned a higher grade than the tutor's rubric score. Upperclassmen were also more likely to correctly identify their paper's strengths and weaknesses, regardless of reading the paper before the survey or not.

Discussion

The results of this study may affect the tutoring session style for general education classes in the department. Though general education classes do not only include underclassmen, most students in these classes would still possess a limited knowledge of the necessary writing conventions for a successful paper in the department because they have not practiced using the writing conventions as much as students in upper-level department classes. For this study, the majority of underclassmen were in general education classes (90%) and most upperclassmen wrote papers for upper-level classes (80%). One may assume students in upper-level classes have had more exposure to the writing conventions of the department, meaning the students would be more apt to correctly determine their overall grade. However, only 50% of the upperclassmen in the study were able to correctly grade their paper. The reason for these results could be due to a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, the professor, the amount of time and effort, and prior knowledge. A separate study is necessary to explore the findings about upperclassmen in more detail. One conclusion the findings do suggest though is the insignificant role of self-assessment on upperclassmen, there was no difference between the success rates of both groups. This outcome could be due to a variety of factors as well, such as, prior experience with self-assessment, self-efficacy in the department, non-

observed self-assessment before attending the tutoring session, and experience with the writing conventions.

The results of this study will be the most influential on tutoring sessions with underclassmen. Though the effect of self-assessment on students' grades was not determined, the accuracy of students' self-evaluation of their papers was discovered. The underclassmen who did not accurately grade their papers gave themselves a higher grade than the tutor gave them. This disconnect implies the underclassmen who visited the ARC did not clearly understand the requirements for a successful paper. For example, though a student knows they need a strong thesis, they do not know if they have one or how to make their current thesis stronger. The tutor should be sure to clearly explain writing conventions and how to successfully complete the conventions in tutoring sessions and not simply tell a student they need a stronger thesis.

The study also revealed the benefit of requiring underclassmen to read their papers before the tutor makes suggestions. Students who read their paper before assigning a grade were more likely to correctly grade their paper. Being able to determine how well one successfully met the required writing conventions is the first step in improving writing skills. A student may not know how to meet a writing convention, but if they know they have not adequately met the requirements for that convention then they can seek assistance. Requiring underclassmen to read their papers in the tutoring session may help foster independent learning among students, an important skill for higher-education students.

Action Plan

Based on the findings in this action research study, the researcher will make sure to clearly define how to meet specific writing conventions during the tutoring sessions. Also, the requirements for altering ARC practices will be explored and started, in order to require

general-education students to read their papers during tutoring sessions. Though this action-research study cannot be generalized, it suggests students need assistance in understanding writing conventions, whether from tutoring services like the ARC or professors. Exploring the best practices for helping students learning writing conventions could be a future study. If the researcher wanted to continue to explore self-assessment, documenting the effects of self-assessment on the same students across a specific time period may provide more insight. By studying how self-assessment affects students' rubric scores over multiple drafts of a paper may help the researcher to better determine the effect of self-assessment on students' grades. Though some research questions may not have been definitively answered, this study provides the researcher with a foundation to build further research.

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