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“What Really Matters: A Collective Case Study Describing How Six Community College Instructors Grade Freshman English Compositions”

**by Gail K.L. Ho Levy <glevy@hawaii.edu>
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Hawaii at Manoa
Professor CC, Leeward Community College**

The purpose of this exploratory, multiple case study is to describe and understand the grading practices of community college writing instructors, how they apply their stated grading schemas when evaluating Freshman English compositions. This study has educational importance because it (1) focuses on a course that has historically served as a controversial gatekeeper and gateway to higher education; (2) gives voice to the community college instructors who teach many sections of this course but are still largely invisible in the literature; and (3) addresses assessment, accountability, and accreditation issues that greatly concern many stakeholders.

This study is based on several theoretical perspectives:

1. *Cognitive and naturalistic decision-making theories*. Because of the human mind’s limited intake and “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1957), from the plethora of data in the task environment, each instructor selects the grading elements and criteria important in and relevant to his/her specific context and is often satisfied with “acceptable” rather than “optimal” results.
2. *Qualitative, collective case study approach*. Because each instructor constructs a complex, individual grading schema, it is difficult to generalize beyond this study’s findings. However, if the emergent patterns and themes resonate with others, then perhaps the participants speak for their colleagues as well as for themselves.
3. *Process-tracing and think-aloud protocol*. Concurrent verbal protocols and retrospective debriefings were developed by researchers in cognitive psychology, computer science, and composition studies as data collection methods to capture cognitive processes and empirical data. These methods seem to provide a valid way to delve into instructors’ minds and to track their grading processes.

The sites were three community colleges in the University of Hawaii’s (UH) public, higher education system. To obtain a purposeful criterion sampling, the following selection criteria were used: (1) teach at least one English100 (Expository Writing or Composition I) class during the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters; (2) be employed as full-time instructional faculty; and (3) have at least three years experience teaching English 100 in the UH Community College system.

Nine instructors volunteered for this study’s Phase I; they submitted documents and were interviewed once, each for about two hours. Six of the nine continued in Phase II; they were observed as they graded two research papers (a common paper written by a student at my home campus and a unique paper written by one of their own students), and then they were interviewed after each of the two grading sessions. To achieve triangulation and support for my inferences, I collected (1) *documents*, the instructors’ syllabi and student handouts explaining their composition assignments and grading systems; (2) *direct observations and concurrent verbal protocols* of the instructors as they read, commented on, and graded the two papers; (3) *physical artifacts*, the two papers with the instructors’ written comments and grades on them; (4) *interviews and transcripts* of the instructors’ thoughts before and after they had read, commented on, and graded the two papers; and (5) *e-mail exchanges* clarifying and confirming the instructors’ oral and written comments.

The following results and conclusions emerged from the data analysis:

1. Grades for composition assignments accounted for 50%-75% of the students’ final course grades, and the research paper assignment carried the most weight.
2. The participants were evenly divided in their grading approaches between *holistic* and *multiple trait* analyses and in their grading processes among *principled scan/read*, *pragmatic scan/read*, and *provisional mark*, the latter categories developed by Milanovic, Saville, and Shuhong (1996).
3. The participants’ stated grading systems blended both textual *written product* elements (unity, support, organization, source documentation, sentence structure, and content level) and extra-textual *writing process* elements (revision, response, and punctuality), with the former elements given more weight and being more stable. Extra-textual elements addressing *individual students’ effort and progress* were less clearly stated and integrated into their grading systems, but nevertheless entered into the participants’ grading decisions for exceptional (e.g., ESL, disabled, at-risk) students.
4. The participants’ common community college experiences appeared to shape a common composition perspective, a combination of the 1950’s current-traditional rhetoric paradigm and the 1970’s writing process movement. They focused on pragmatic improvement in writing and communication skills but shied away from, if not ignored, the 1990’s critical theorists’ agenda of political demystification and social change.

5. When the participants operationalized their grading systems and evaluated the two sample research papers, the research elements and appropriate use of source materials, which distinguish this composition assignment from the others, were evaluated in a haphazard manner. Also, there were more fluctuations in the tentative grades across a wider range of grades when the participants evaluated their own students' papers than when they evaluated one written by a student about whom they knew very little. It appears that when the participants tried to combine more elements and criteria and to fit them into one letter or number, the grading processes became more complicated and less predictable.

Characteristics of Participants' Grading Sessions

<i>ID</i>	<i>Marking Approach</i>	<i>Length of 1st Grading Session</i>	<i>Number Of Pages</i>	<i>Grade for 1st Sample Paper</i>	<i>Length of 2nd Grading Session</i>	<i>Number of Pages</i>	<i>Grade for 2nd Sample Paper</i>
PA-1 Katie	Principled multi-scan/read	1 hr. 25 min.	6	C to C-/D+	1 hr. 10 min.	11	B+ to B/B+
PA-2 Jon	Provisional mark	20 min.	6	D to C-	10 min.	5	B+ to B
PB-1 Jane	Pragmatic 2-scan/read	45 min.	6	Low B (B-)	1 hr. 18 min. (w/criteria sheet)	8	B or C to C to low B (B-)
PB-2 Sam	Pragmatic 2-scan/read	32 min.	6	C-	1 hr. (w/criteria sheet)	10	D+ to C+ to A+ to A-
PB-3 Aslan	Provisional mark	35 min.	6	C to C-	38 min.	12	C- to B to B- to C+ to B
PC-1 Roz	Principled 2-scan/read	40 min.	6	C+ to B- to C+	31 min.	8	B+ to A- to B+ to C+ to B+

Recommendations for classroom instructors:

1. Require that the sources be submitted with the students' final drafts and compare the sources and the quotations, paraphrases, and summaries in the final drafts. If the sources are not submitted, and that seems to be a common practice among instructors, then the research elements cannot be evaluated well.
2. Schedule the deadline for the research paper assignment earlier in the semester, or better yet, have a research component in all the composition assignments throughout the semester.
3. Base the final grades for the research papers only on the product elements and criteria. The fewer the considerations, the greater the probability of coherent and predictable grade choices. Count the extra-textual elements in the final course grades, but don't confound the meaning of the papers' final grades; this focus on the product might even make the grading process easier for instructors.
4. Keep abreast with the students' writing processes. It is not enough to depend on peer response groups and other students to point out where writers are going awry in the various stages and to detect plagiarism.

Recommendations for disciplines, divisions, and the University of Hawaii system:

1. Set more realistic student learning outcomes for English 100 and delegate more, not less, responsibilities for teaching reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking to other courses.
2. Collect longitudinal data on student achievement and progress before and after completion of English 100 and share the data with the instructors.
3. Plan, implement, support, and sustain regular meetings for composition instructors to discuss their concerns and issues that arise from specific compositions.

Need for further study:

In interviewing and observing a few instructors reading, commenting on, and grading papers, I got only half the story. The other half lies in what happens in the students' minds when they receive those marked up papers. Is it true that students just look at the grades and ignore the comments that their instructors have spent so much time formulating? Does a C+ spur students on to revise in hopes of obtaining a B-, or are they satisfied with a passing grade? Upon receiving a D, what makes one student give up and disappear from class and another stay and push on? Grading is often difficult under the best conditions, but grading in a vacuum and without knowing its impact on those most affected is profoundly inadequate.