

Community and Collaborative Learning In Penn Writing Seminars

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Research Question



How does the community level within a first-year writing seminar impact the writing confidence of and writing skills learned by the students within the class?

Methods

- Interviews with students in five writing seminars at the end of the Spring 2021 semester*
 - Students self-selected into the sample
- 1 – 3 students per writing seminar
- Questions included:
 - Opinions about community levels and collaborative learning within their writing seminars
 - Confidence in writing and in various college norms (attending office hours, speaking in class discussions, etc.)
 - Prior experience with communication (introvert vs extrovert, high school norms surrounding communication, FGLI vs non-FGLI status, etc.)
- Validity check: interviews with each writing seminar professor
- Coded qualitative data using Nvivo
 - Coded student and professor data separately

* Note: because of COVID-19, this semester was conducted virtually, which almost certainly impacted results

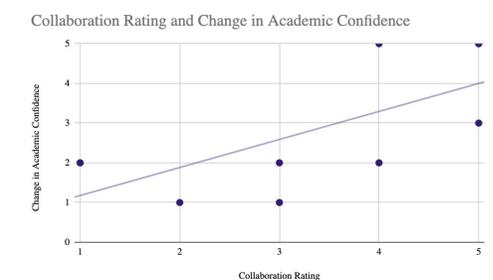
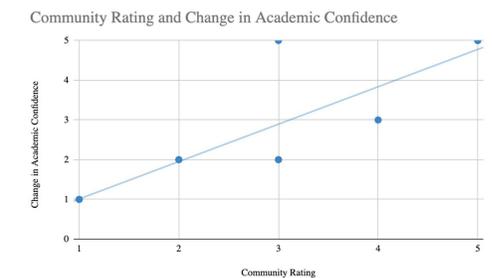
Results

Community Level	Collaboration Level	How did collaboration help learning?	Changes in Writing Confidence
Low	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On peer review and outlining, helped with subject matter • Clarified professor's expectations • Overall, no major impact on learning 	No major changes in writing confidence
Medium-low	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On peer review and outlining, helped with subject matter • Clarified professor's expectations • Overall, no major impact on learning 	Slightly higher writing confidence
Medium	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarified professor's expectations (Student #6) • Helped with brainstorming for major assignments (Student #10) 	Student #6 reported slightly higher writing confidence; Student #10 reported significantly higher writing confidence
Medium-high	Very high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped with brainstorming for major assignments • Increased vocabulary • Increased understanding of structures of new genres • Gave each other excellent feedback 	Slightly higher writing confidence overall, significantly higher confidence in writing in new genres/for new audiences
High	Very high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped with brainstorming for major assignments • Gave each other excellent feedback 	Significantly higher writing confidence

Conclusion

- Writing confidence increases in almost direct proportion to community level
- In comparison, although increase writing confidence is also linked to increased collaboration level, there is a less direct relationship than the one between writing confidence and community level
- Depth of learning from collaborative activities also seems to increase with higher community
 - Lower-community classes: benefits of collaboration centered around clarifying assignments
 - Higher-community classes: benefits centered around brainstorming and increased understanding of writing skills
- Implication: in high-community classes, students are more deeply engaged with collaborative activities than students in low-community classes, even when the same activities are required in all classes; and when students are more engaged, they report higher levels of learning

Figures #1 and #2



Significance

Preexisting scholarship has suggested that the social dimension is irrelevant to collaborative learning as long as students learn writing skills. This research suggests that the social dimension is important precisely *because* it leads to learning of writing skills. As a result, it may be more conducive to collaborative learning for professors to facilitate activities centered around community-building than to directly facilitate collaborative activities.

Bruffee, K. (1984). "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English*, 46(7), 635–652.