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Assessing Students Rule-Bound Writing Development

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Why WMU Writing Center Directly Took on LOCs & Proofreading

Most writing centers focus on **HOCs**, or **Higher Order Concerns**—rhetorical process strategies, meaning making insights, political savviness, and, possibly, psychological needs specific to writers—to ensure assistance helps writers learn ways to improve their writing rather than lets writers use center to correct texts, or proofread, so the writers get a good grade.

The Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Professional Readiness Exam (MTTC-PRE) values correctness over effective and engaged writing. Some WMU instructors trying to help students, especially L2 students, improve their writing focus only on **LOCs**, which are **rule-bound issues**, or **Lower Order Concerns**. Instructors in such cases tend to oversimplify writing and often unknowingly use worst practices in writing pedagogy, including:

- Using fatal error lists that claim rule-bound mistakes destroy meaning of written text
- Requiring or suggestion students complete elementary or middle school grammar worksheets if students make LOC mistakes
- Marking each LOC mistake in a paper and possibly deducting point for each LOC mistake, but ignoring what students do effectively or offering no helpful HOC comments
- Teaching grammar outside of students’ own writing
- Reading papers for errors, not meaning or engagement
- Viewing LOCs as indicative of students’ writing or critical thinking ability
- Ignoring or overlooking development process as students learn to write without LOC errors
- Turning rubrics into template generators or using style templates that deny students rhetorical problem solving opportunities.

*To help WMU students engage with MTTC-PRE correctness emphasis and limited or misguided writing instruction without destroying students’ faith or interest in learning to write, the Writing Center began helping students learn to incorporate **rule-bound**, **LOCs** into their own writing style.*

Writing Center LOCs Pedagogical Logistics

- Focus on proofreading to ensure insights transferred to other writing students must do and that lessons were based on students’ own writing
- Offer assistance to students who first work to understand and control HOCs issues; often students who make multiple visits for same writing project
- After helping students with HOCs and seeing improvement in those areas, turned to LOCs
- Asked/surveyed students about writing and proofreading processes
- Conducted error analysis of individual students’ LOCs errors and ranked errors in terms of most likely to distract reader to least likely to distract reader
- Questioned writer about logic behind LOC error
- Taught student needed insights for specific LOC issue
- Taught student to proofread strategically for specific LOC slips
- Required student to develop and use proofreading list
- Tried to let students self-teach using behavior modification modules about rule-bound, LOC concerns.

Assessment Method

- Survey/Interview students about proofreading knowledge and us
- Compare texts students wrote prior to proofreading list use to texts students wrote after, looking for specific errors listed in student’s Individual Proofreading List
- Survey/Interview students about learning satisfaction and perceptions of transfer
- Use protocol analysis while students engage in grammar modules without Writing Center assistance
- Collect students MTTC-PRE scores

Example of One Writer’s Individual Proofreading Strategy for MTTC-PRE

*Thesis - Names position & forecasts So What? Reasons
Topic Sent-Trans + connection to thesis + Para topic
3 frags. “ing” words, “W” words, “There is”/“There are”
3 fixes: Add to front, Add to what follows, Just complete
Dependent Markers: after, although as, as long as, as though, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, if only, in order that, now that, once, rather than, so that, since, though, till, unless, until, when, whenever, whereas, wherever, while
Commas
IC, cc IC
DC, IC
IC DC
Pronouns—P/N agreement
They, it, he, she, ours, them, yours, we
--Put finger on pronoun and trace to referent
--Singular or Plural? Fix or leave as needed
Parallelism—Find beginning of list. Use each part as if it were end of sentence, compare tense and beginning structure of each part. Change or leave as needed.
CC - Fan, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So (FANBOYS)
To be verbs—is, am, are, was, were, been, being
Helping verbs—to have (has, had); to do (did, does, done) might, must, should, would, could, can, may, shall, will
Verbs = carry tense; can word be changed to different time?
Ask “This” what or “That what”*

Findings

- Vast majority of students do not proofread assignments for class or do not know ways to proofread successfully
- Many students do not see errors they know and do not, of course, see errors they don’t know
- Most mistakes were based in partial understanding of actual LOC rule: Spelling mistakes never more than two letters off. Commas mistakes often grounded in misapplication of rule, including hyper-corrections
- Students who wrote proofreading guides found comfort from them in high stress situations
- Students had fewer errors in post-papers
- Students had trouble using grammar modules because of the complexity of needed prior knowledge
- Students improved paper grades, found grammar “easy once it was explained,” and passed MTTC-PRE

Actions Determined From Assessment

- Use usage and grammar modules as reinforcement; keep instruction within students writing if possible
- Offer writing pedagogy training
- Promote LOCs and HOCs on website
- Continue gathering assessment data
- Continue to train staff to use proofreading guides