

Questions Worth Asking: Intersections between Writing Research and Computational Linguistics

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Outline

- ▶ **Context and corpus**
- ▶ **Issues in writing research**
 - ▶ Validity of Directed Self Placement (writing placement)
 - ▶ Student writing confidence
 - ▶ English Language Learning
- ▶ **Goals**
 - ▶ Explain important issues arising in college writing and placement, especially in a particular context
 - ▶ Discuss ways to use corpus linguistics tools to explore these issues

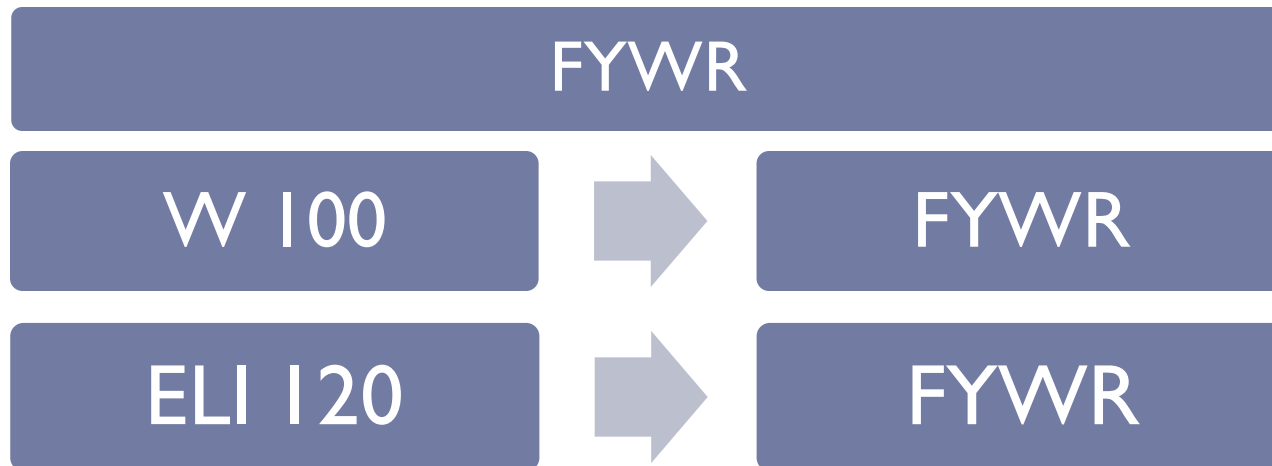


Context: UM SCW



- ▶ **Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan**
 - ▶ placement of apprx 4000 first-year students in Literature, Sciences and Arts (LSA); Nursing; Kinesiology; Art and Design; Music (total undergrad: apprx 26000)
 - ▶ oversight of all courses that meet First Year Writing Requirement (FYWR) and Upper Level Writing Requirement (ULWR)
 - ▶ **UM Undergrad Demographics**
 - ▶ High-achieving students: HS GPA avg 3.75; SAT writing avg 680
 - ▶ Significant (apprx 5%) number of international students who are ELL, along w unknown number of Generation 1.5 students
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Context: DSP

- ▶ Directed self placement (DSP): 2000-present
- ▶ Students self-assess and make placement choice
- ▶ **At UM: choice between Writing 100 (preparatory course) and FYWR course**



Context: past DSP at UM

- ▶ At UM 2000-2008: students answered 7 questions about their reading and writing practices
 - ▶ 2000-05: mastery (e.g., “I have learned...”)
 - ▶ 2006-08: comfort, confidence (e.g., “I feel comfortable...”)
 - ▶ Shift:  no. of recommendations;
 no. followed recommendations



Changing DSP at UM

- ▶ 2000-2008 DSP at UM: weak substantive, structural, and consequential validity (Gere, Aull, Green, & Porter, forthcoming in *Assessing Writing*)
- ▶ New reading-to-write task began in fall 2009
- ▶ Further interested in consequential validity of the DSP process (main result = W100 or FYWR)



New DSP at UM

- ▶ 2009: incoming FY students required to read approx 3500 word publication and respond in 750-900 word evidence-based argument (submitted online)
 - ▶ Simulates construct of writing in FYWR courses
 - ▶ Preparatory course doubled in enrollment
- ▶ Essays sent to respective instructors prior to semester for use as diagnostic essay and in instruction



DSP present context, corpus

- ▶ DSP essay Corpus
 - ▶ 3575 essays by incoming FY students
 - ▶ responded to *New Yorker* article by Malcolm Gladwell about how to select & retain US teachers (*NY Dec 08*)
 - ▶ Apprx 3.1 million words
 - ▶ Will more than double each year



Exploring DSP and writing using the DSP corpus

Initial questions:

- ▶ How can we best use the existing corpus and additional ones we might create to determine the extent to which the writing of students who elect Writing 100 differs from that of students who choose to enroll immediately in courses that meet the FYWR?
- ▶ How might we best create and analyze subcorpora to understand how writers in each subgroup articulate arguments and use evidence?



Current status and directions

(5 June 2010)

▶ Subcorpora created

- 1) **ELI I20**
- 2) **WI00**
- 3) **FYWR**
- 4) **No FYW**

- Intros
- Body paras
- Conclusions
- Intros with and without evaluative language
- Direct citations
- References to article

▶ Qualitative coding for moves

- Informing
- Proposing
- Supporting

➤ Explicit discourse markers, organization, lexical variety



Evaluative language list

1. important

2. true

3. interesting

4. best

5. central

6. correct

7. better

8. negative

9. positive

10. major

11. good

12. effective

13. agree

14. disagree

15. serious

16. a good

teacher

17. the best

teachers

18. valuable

19. great

20. beneficial

21. valid

22. bad

23. help*

24. hard

25. necessary

26. difficult

27. impossible

28. right

29. wrong

30. possible

31. flaws



Student writing confidence

- ▶ DSP may be more a measure of confidence than of writing ability (Reynolds, 2003)
 - ▶ Survey data suggests that students are influenced by confidence in their writing ability but that it does not necessarily correlate to performance
 - ▶ Similar conclusions in Pajares & Johnson, 2003
- ▶ Could create subcorpora in terms of self-reported confidence and competence



English language learning

- ▶ Can identify patterns in ELL student essays versus FYWR for use by instructors and in instruction
- ▶ Need better ways of identifying Generation 1.5 students early in university work
- ▶ Need to make college writing expectations at UM more transparent for ELL and other groups



Remaining questions and interests

- ▶ How can we best use the existing corpus and additional ones?
- ▶ How might we best create and analyze subcorpora?
- ▶ How might we best analyze corpora for the sake of:
 - ▶ Identifying effective writing for models, instruction?
 - ▶ Identifying students who might benefit from more support?



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Thank you!

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