My First Time Conducting a Study as a Novice Researcher

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The field of Writing Studies borrows and adapts research methods from many disciplines, including quantitative and qualitative methods from the social sciences. However, many people still think of empirical research as something that is out of reach for undergraduate students in liberal arts majors. In this methodological reflection, the author describes her own journey from believing empirical research was for other people (especially those who like math) to conducting her own empirical research study related to faculty and students' perceptions of "Standard English." The author's reflection on the process of designing her study and collecting data not only provides an encouraging and honest "behind-the-scenes" look at the recursive nature of empirical research for other novice researchers in Writing Studies, but also reminds more experienced researchers, especially faculty, of the unique constraints undergraduate researchers face, especially when conducting studies that involve faculty as participants or rely on faculty to recruit participants.

Prior to beginning my empirical research, I believed that empirical studies were mainly done by scientists. In "Conducting and Composing RAD Research in the Writing Center: A Guide for New Authors," Dana Lynn Driscoll and Roger Powell write that calls for Replicable, Aggregable, and Data-supported research (RAD) "often manifests in claims that…[it] is quantitative in nature and therefore inappropriate for writing center inquiry." I used to feel this way too, thinking empirical study = math = numbers = gross! As a Film Studies and Production and English: Creative Writing and Literature double major, I never imagined that I would conduct an empirical study.

In my Practicum in Writing Center Pedagogy class, I started to realize that professors' expectations about Standard English and formally written assignments varied widely from discipline to discipline and even within my own majors. Some professors welcomed the use of the personal voice, sprinkled opinions, and passionately strewn-together curse words, and they invited more loosely-structured and even multimodal ways of learning and writing. Whereas other professors wanted students to adopt an "academic voice," follow a rigid structure and format, and remain neutral and objective while writing and constructing an argument. As a student, I have to adjust my writing style for different classes and professors,

and I wanted to know why such a disparity of standardization of academic English existed across disciplines.

In my first-year composition course, I was given the freedom to write academic papers in my own voice, and I wondered why other professors and subjects denied my peers and me the liberty to do the same. Furthermore, as a sophomore with nowhere to fit in and no idea of where I belonged, I was eager to prove myself and show people that I could do something important, that I had agency even as a young twenty-year-old. I decided to conduct an empirical study because I not only wanted to find the answers to my questions but also wanted to prove that I was worth something and had authority within academia and the world, even though I had never conducted an empirical study or had been given the opportunity to do so before. In this essay, I will talk about the challenges of being a novice researcher and the vulnerable position that I was put in while trying to assert and justify myself while recruiting faculty participants as they questioned my authority as an undergraduate researcher.

Refining a Research Question AKA "I Don't Know What My Professor Wants from Me."

In the Fall of 2019, I had the pleasure of attending the Naylor Workshop in York, Pennsylvania, where undergraduate students and their faculty mentors organized and worked to help create and further undergraduate research. I went to the Naylor Workshop initially asking the questions: "How can we make writing centers more accessible to writing, specifically in terms of 'Standard Academic English' (SAE)" and "How can writing centers combat the ill-defined rules of SAE, the different expectations people have about it, and make it more accessible to students?" However, I realized that there is no such thing as "Standard English" because the rules are so ill-defined (Greenfield) and that I needed to refine my research questions to find out what students and professors thought about SAE, what their preconceived notions were, how they defined it across disciplines, and what their expectations were for students' written assignments. Only then could I think about how writing center tutors could help students navigate SAE and professors' expectations across disciplines. By refining my research question, I realized that I didn't want to study SAE and racism because there were many theoretical and empirical studies in writing studies and linguistics that already examined this ideology. I wanted to know why writing was difficult for students and, even more, why some disciplines and professors were against writing in a personal voice.

Inventing a Research Space

I was an empirical study novice, "a (non)author and an academic outsider who had to invent the university" (Grobman W178). Even though I was open to the idea and knew I wanted to survey and interview professors and students because I was curious about their thoughts and feelings about SAE and the usage of the personal voice in academic assignments, I didn't know where or how to begin. In his CARS ("Create a Research Space") model, John Swales describes

that researchers usually "establish a niche" or argue that a space needs to be filled with additional research and then "occupy" it by filling the gap (Downs and Wardle 6-8). I talked with professors who had experience reading, writing, and teaching writing studies, but I couldn't find empirical studies about faculty and student perceptions of SAE. Not ready to accept defeat, I took to Hofstra University's database and searched "standard academic English," "standard English," and even "remedial English" but didn't find the kind of research I was looking for in the field of writing studies or in the broader category of "education." Dr. Andrea Rosso Efthymiou—my mentor—and I also met with our university's research librarian, a linguistics scholar who is well-versed in education. She pointed me to *The Study of Nonstandard English* and *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular,* both by William Labov. These studies talked about theories of nonstandard English, how language is negotiated, and the perceptions that people have about nonstandard English—racist perceptions that I already knew about. Both books included case studies and interviews with Black students and students placed in "remedial" writing and speaking courses, backed by a lot of theory, but little about people's perceptions and professors' and students' expectations about SAE in academic assignments.

"Who, What, When, Where and Why" (AKA Creating a Methodology)

I realized that I would be conducting this study on a blank slate—I was pumped, I was a pioneer!—but since I was new to research, I also had MANY questions to tackle before I crafted survey and interview questions: who's my audience, how do I recruit participants, and how do I define what SAE is? I wanted to find out what the preconceived notions about SAE were across disciplines, so I initially imagined recruiting professors and students from Hofstra University's distribution (general education/core) classes, but I didn't know how writing-based these classes were, and there were over 100 distribution classes offered at Hofstra in Spring 2020. A few professors at the Naylor Workshop suggested focusing on writing-intensive courses, so there would be a constant in my study. One professor at my university suggested focusing on the Honors College classes, while another asked if I wanted to focus on first-year writing classes. Ultimately, I picked writing-intensive classes because these courses came from across a wide range of disciplines. There were also only 39 writing-intensive classes being taught (not including lab components of some classes and one cross-listed class), which resulted in a manageable sample size. Since I wanted to target a specific group of classes, I had to find the professors' emails, which was easy. But, as a student, I wasn't privy to students' emails. My faculty mentor and I even contacted the university's Institutional Research office, asking for access to students' emails, but despite having an approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study, we were ultimately denied because of the confidentiality of student records. I didn't want to depend on professors making the survey available to their students, but ultimately I had to rely on professors to pass my survey onto students because of the constraints of my position as an undergraduate researcher.

Otherwise, my study would not have had any student participants, and this was crucial to get a fuller understanding of the expectations and preconceived notions about SAE.

DESIGNING AND DISTRIBUTING THE SURVEY—"OH MY"

The survey had two tracks: one for faculty and another for students. Both professors and students were asked to identify their writing-intensive class and describe the class's student population. The surveys had an optional question asking respondents to provide their contact information if they wanted to be interviewed. Students were asked to identify their class standing and graduation year, as well as why they were taking the particular class (major/minor requirement, elective, or general education credit). I also asked them to rate their enjoyment of the class (on a scale from 1-5 with 1 being "strongly no" and 5 being "strongly yes") and to explain their rating. I included these questions about enjoyment because the answers would allow me to assess their opinion of a professor and the class content in terms of SAE. For example, once I was in a Native American Literature class, and a student said they were only taking the class to satisfy a "cross-cultural" requirement and originally didn't want to attend the course. At my institution, a course that is categorized as cross-cultural "focuses on the intellectual and cultural traditions of the peoples of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia. Courses in this category engage students in a rigorous study of

the traditions and practices of one or more of these peoples" ("Hofstra College"). However, the student enjoyed learning about the oral traditions and culture of Native Americans and indigenous people, which allowed them to have a positive perspective of the assignments, the professor, and the class. In other words, my survey questions about enjoyment tried to look for biases or experiences that a student had that could influence their expectations and assessment of a class or SAE.

Professors and students were asked complementary questions that reflected their standing in the university. Both groups were asked to describe formal written assignments; faculty were asked to describe the formal written assignments they had already given or were going to give, and students were asked to describe the formal written assignments they had been given or were going to get. Similarly, faculty were asked if they believed they were approachable before and after an assignment was given a grade, and students were asked if they felt their professors were approachable before and after an assignment was handed in and graded. Both groups were also asked to describe if there was anything frustrating to them about SAE; professors were asked if there was anything they saw their students struggling with in terms of writing and, similarly, students were asked if there was anything they found particularly difficult to do when writing. Professors were given an optional question, asking them to provide a sample assignment prompt and rubric; the related optional question for students was to provide a "good" or "bad" paper and

explained why they labeled their writing with these categories.

One element of the survey that was particularly challenging was attempting to understand the educational and pedagogical experiences of professors and students that led to their attitudes about SAE. Therefore, the most controversial and difficult question in the survey was, "Check off all features that you believe Standard English contains." Since there was no definitive definition of Standard English (Greenfield), I compiled an ever-growing list of attributes: "Grammar," "organization," "flow," "academic voice," "personal voice," "slang," "prompt," "audience," "citations" etc. The more I talked to professors and students, the list of possible attributes of SAE became endless. This question was the most challenging to design because it assessed "emotions, attitudes, and perceptions," and they are "multidimensional" (Salem 204). It assessed dispositions or rather the perspectives or outlooks of participants. How faculty and students define "Standard English" depends on their educational and pedagogical backgrounds and philosophies, whether chances are given for presenting academic assignments creatively, and personal preference. In other words, this question tried to understand faculty and student perspectives on what they deem acceptable and unacceptable, correct and incorrect in their respective disciplines based on their own experiences within their fields.

Deciding the wording to use in the survey was hard because the word choices had to be identifiable, relatable, and accessible to the particular audience. The term I used for Standard Academic English was heavily debated: "Standard Academic English," "Standard English," "SAE," "Edited English," the list went on and on. But ultimately, I decided to use "Standard English" because I had heard of that term while in high school, and many students at the Naylor Workshop had also said that they recognized that term instead of "Standard Academic English" or the other variations. At my university's Fall 2019 Undergraduate Research Day, while I was explaining my project to one of my professors, he understood that "Standard English" was "the way you're taught to write in school"—whatever that meant to people.

Just as I thought I was close to finishing the survey design, I had problems with the distribution interface, Qualtrics. I had never used Qualtrics before, so I sent my survey out as a test to my faculty mentor and a couple of my friends, but their answers did not show up in my test results. I had to ask for help from a Qualtrics expert at my institution who had agreed to help me even though they usually worked with faculty researchers. But even after their help, I was apprehensive of whether or not students and faculty would be able to access and answer all of the questions. I was worried that the survey would redirect my participants to sections that weren't designated for them.

In addition to the informed consent portion of the survey in my IRB application, I had to tailor formal individual recruitment emails to professors that reflected my IRB application. To distribute the survey and persuade professors to distribute the survey to their students, I reached out to my faculty mentor, who helped me write a professional email to professors that

explained my project, requested their participation, and urged them to forward the survey to their students. Individualizing the emails to faculty was time-intensive and stressful. I had to email each professor and specify what writing-intensive classes they were teaching to ensure they sent the survey to the right group of students. I was afraid that I'd misspell their names, a word, phrase, and/or type the wrong information—ahhhhh! I had to be meticulous in crafting my email because I had to convince professors to work with me; otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to recruit participants. If I misspelled a name or wrote the wrong class number and title, not only would I have seemed unprofessional and deterred professors from participating (and therefore their students), but also could have directed them and students to take the survey for the wrong class or one that did not exist. I was also anxious about getting participants because I couldn't control if students would be able to access the survey, I didn't know if professors would take it, and I doubted that anybody would want to be interviewed. However, I'm proud to say that I got 73 responses to my survey (17 faculty and 56 student responses)—yay!

AUTHORITY AND VULNERABILITY OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCHERS

In "The Student Scholar: (Re)Negotiating Authorship and Authority," Laurie Grobman writes that "student scholars obtain authorship and authority through participation in undergraduate research." However, when undergraduate students ask for faculty participation, especially in studies that seek to understand professorial classroom behaviors and practices, WE become vulnerable. I was "marked with an essence" as "essentially lacking" because I had to "submit [myself] to authorities who would authorize [me]" (Grobman 78). My authority as a researcher was questioned, and, because I had to depend on faculty for student recruitment (because as a student, I don't have access to student information), I was at the mercy of professors.

After distributing my surveys to faculty, imploring them to take it and pass it on to their students in their writing-intensive courses, I felt frustrated by my perceived denial of agency as an undergraduate researcher.

The "No"

One professor I contacted said they could not help me because they had already asked their class to fill out a survey for another student researcher and asking their students to participate again would be too much. Although, as a student, I appreciated that the professor did not want to burden their students with extra work, as a researcher and a person receiving the email, I was taken aback by how quickly the professor refused to participate. The survey was optional. I simply requested that professors take the survey and pass it on to their students. This professor exercised their free will in deciding not to participate, but by refusing to distribute the survey to their students, they took away students' freewill because every participant had the option to decide whether or not to take the survey and stop any time if they so desired.

Although many professors did not participate in the survey, most didn't email me back to let me know. When I think about it, I should appreciate the professor's candor for actually taking the time to deny my request for participation. But at the time, it felt like a dismissal email, especially since there was no statement of goodwill included. Although I was able to get 73 responses to my survey, professors deciding not to participate affected my data pool because when someone decides not to answer a survey, it not only limits the response rate but it also reduces the amount of potentially valuable information that might have been gained from their answers.

The Inquiry

Some professors also wanted further information about my study. Some wanted to know what I meant by "Standard English" because they had never heard the term before. One explained that they were educated outside of the United States and were curious about what I meant by the term. One faculty member wanted to know the purpose of my study, what I was going to use it for, and my class and supervising professor. Another professor asked me to send them my IRB approval letter.

Being met with these questions made me feel self-conscious as a novice researcher. I felt like my intentions and validity in conducting empirical research were being questioned, especially since I had written a professional email to faculty members requesting their participation and had also written that the study was sponsored by the Department of Writing Studies and Rhetoric. The survey's consent form specifically stated that my study was IRB approved and listed the IRB approval number. It's possible that some professors haven't seen many undergraduate students conduct an empirical study and wondered if I knew the protocol. It makes me think that many faculty members may believe that empirical research is mostly conducted by graduate students, professionals within academia and beyond, or science students at the undergraduate level. If professors are mainly encouraged and funded to conduct research, then that may mean that there is a gap in student-led research where students, especially at the undergraduate level, are not given many opportunities to conduct research or aren't properly taught what research is. At my university's Undergraduate Research Day, most students presenting were from biology, psychology, chemistry, and other science-related majors. It seems that research and opportunities for research in the humanities, especially composition, English, communications, and art fields, are scarce and may be overlooked at some institutions.

Being met with resistance made me feel the power dynamics of the academy acutely. I wonder if some professors expressed apprehension towards helping out an undergraduate researcher because I wasn't asking to interview them about their expertise as an uninformed novice. Rather, I was asking them to examine their own teaching methods, syllabi, and curriculum as a student (researcher), questions typically posed by authority figures like a chairperson or dean. In "Literacy, Discourse, And Linguistics: Introduction," James Paul

Gee states, "Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction... but by enculturation ("apprenticeship") into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (7). Undergraduate students will not be enculturated into any discourse of scholarship, nor will they gain an overarching pedagogical background relevant to their interest without the help and support of experts across disciplines. Undergraduate research needs to be supported by professors across all disciplines. Professional development for faculty cannot be defined as merely attending conferences and conducting research. Professional development for professors must include learning methods for mentoring students and welcoming undergraduate students in the research process with better communication and understanding. Only then can we reinvent the university to make undergraduate research more equitable and accessible across all disciplines, not just the sciences.

The Yikes—Ohhh!

The most striking response came from a faculty member who questioned the survey itself. They said that they answered the survey questions, but I needed to be clearer about using the term "Standard English." They also indicated that my survey was long and expressed that I needed to better understand their specific course topic and the goals of writing-intensive courses broadly. Despite this response, this participant answered all survey questions in detail.

At first, I was caught off-guard by this email, and quite frankly, was shocked, scared, and felt intimidated by the professor's comments. I wondered why they didn't just stop taking the survey. I was scared and hesitant to respond to the email because I didn't know how they would react. This professor was an authority figure and, honestly, as an undergraduate researcher, a student, and a young person, it can be challenging trying to assert yourself to an authority figure, an established individual. Despite my initial feelings of discomfort, I decided that I had to thank and appreciate them as well as explain the reasoning behind my choices. After sending my email, this professor responded, explaining that their class is heavily based on reading and writing. They believed that writing-intensive courses could only teach people to write competently and skillfully, but that a professor's real obligation to their students is to help them develop an appreciation for language in all its forms by creating and engaging in language consciousness. Language is negotiated, and according to them, each language has its own style and represents a culture. By reading good writing and engaging in a discussion about the content and writing style, students can learn not only to write genuinely well, but negotiate language in a way that will allow them to be empowered through good expression.

Although I was afraid of responding to the professor, in the end, I was touched by their compassion for languages and commitment to learning. I was honored that they chose to share their ideas and beliefs, and their response helped me recognize that writing is not

independent of reading. Although they questioned my terminology, they engaged in a dialogue with me about their own frustrations with the curriculum and how it aligned with their own language ideology, which is what I originally wanted: to create a dialogue between faculty and students about their expectations from assignments and about language.

CONCLUSION

How on earth did I, a liberal arts/communications major, book lover, and film connoisseur, do all of this? Honestly, I even had trouble writing this methodological reflection because I again didn't know how to start. I can say, though, that without taking this leap, I would still believe that an empirical study = science = math = numbers = eww! There is always more to learn: I have to transcribe the interviews I've conducted, and I need to code and analyze my data. I was astonished by some of the survey answers that I was able to glance at. I learned how to do an interview, met some wonderful people through the interviews I conducted, and gained valuable insight from them about teaching and writing. But what confounded me was that a very English-subject person,

with very little science and mathematical experience, was able to conduct an empirical study on something that was seemingly "English" or "Writing Studies," but pertained to all disciplines—writing. One faculty member told me that it was nice seeing an English-person at Undergraduate Research Day because she didn't see that all the time.

To all the students who are thinking of conducting an empirical study but are afraid of all the who, what, when, where, why, and hows, please know that you have to start somewhere. To all the authority figures and expert researchers who may read this, I implore you to think back to when you were inexperienced and felt frustration trying to assert your agencies in the world. To all the novices out there, anyone starting something new—who feel confused, afraid, nervous, anxious, excited, or a combination of these feelings—don't let anyone, not even the voices in your head, tell you that you are unqualified or any less professional than the authority figure. Embrace your vulnerabilities, your uniqueness. You have a new perspective, the determination and courage to try something new, and most importantly, a story to tell—and your story matters!

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