SUBJECT: Research Question: Do our male basic writers prefer to write different papers than our female basic writers?

DATE: 10 January 2005

Background

On the college's main campus from 1997 to 2004, the gender gap – the ratio of male-to-female students – has been increasing according to the Office of Institutional Research. By the fall of 2004, approximately 59% of the student body was male, 41% female. With that in mind, I found that during the fall of 2003 and spring of 2004 semesters, approximately 62% of our basic writing students were males, 38% females, in our ENGH 0990 course. These figures are derived from the results of the "Questionnaire for ENGH 0890 and ENGH 0990 Courses." In other words, the "gender gap" in ENGH 0990 seems larger than that existing in the general student body to the point that nearly two in three of our ENGH 0990 basic writers are males.

These analyses encouraged contract faculty members during the fall of 2004 to support an investigation into this research question: Do our male basic writers prefer to write different papers than our female basic writers? Answers to this question may have implications for assigning papers – required portfolios – for our ENGH 0990 students. As is often the case in research, pursuing answers to the one question has resulted in other findings, some relevant to ENGH 0890 students and portfolios.

Methodology

Attached to this memo is a survey that was designed to gather data relevant to the research question. To understand text, therefore, the survey needs to be reviewed.

The following professors and sections participated in this research:

Professor:	**Section:**	**Professor:**	**Section:**
Bender	ENGH 0890-001	Bender	ENGH 0990-003
Jeffery	ENGH 0890-003		ENGH 0990-007
Matzen	ENGH 0890-004	Matzen	ENGH 0990-005
Marrott	ENGH 0890-006	Jeffery	ENGH 0990-008
			ENGH 0990-010
		Marrott	ENGH 0990-B01
		Williams	ENGH 0990-X01

Administering surveys in these sections meant that 117 ENGH 0890 and 0990 students participated in this survey (64 ENGH 0890 and 113 ENGH 0990 students). However, 13.5% of these students failed to follow the directions on the survey by not ranking assignments with numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Instead, these students failed to use each number once and used one of the numbers two or more times. Fortunately, 153 ENGH 0890 and 0990 students supplied useful data by ranking assignments with numbers 1 through 6. Of this group, 64 were female students, 89 male students. So these are the students who supplied the data for a gender analysis of results. As read later, "age" is also part of data analysis because student respondents provided their ages on the surveys.

Originally, data analysis for each participating section of ENGH 0890 and 0990 was to be completed; however, the small sampling size for each section – how many students supplied useful data in each section – did not merit a per section analysis.

Furthermore, the assignments that are listed on the survey do not represent a comprehensive list of possible assignments for papers in composition. For example, assignments are absent that would support a literature-based, technical writing, or community service approach to teaching composition. On the survey are assignments that are most relevant to the current portfolio requirements and relevant to our general intention to prepare our students for ENGL 1010 (and 2010) and written assignments in courses across the curriculum.

Data Analysis: Gender

Attached is Table 2 that presents data results for the male and female ENGH 0890 students as separate from results for the male and female ENGH 0990 students, regarding students who completed surveys correctly. Because ENGH 0890 and 0990 results parallel or are complementary to summative results, the summative results are next. As one group, male and female, ENGH 0890 and 0990 students ranked assignments as read in Table 1.

In Table 1, a lower number indicates a more preferable assignment and a higher number a less preferable assignment. With that in mind, essentially, the male and female students have the same preferences for assignments as read in Table 1. Incidently, male respondents find the fourth and fifth assignments are equally preferable; whereas, the females find the fourth more preferable to the fifth as listed below. Biases that may be attributed to gender follow Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Results for Male and Female, ENGH 0890 and ENGH 0990 Students

ENGH 0890 & 0990 MALE PREFERENCES: AVERAGES OF RANKINGS (RANGE 2.0)

First Preference	2.4	An essay which includes my personal experience.
Second Preference	2.9	A paper that is fiction or a creative story.
Third Preference	3.3	A persuasive or argument essay.
Fourth Preference	4.0	A summary of a reading.
Fifth Preference	4.0	An analysis of a reading assignment such as a short story.
Sixth Preference	4.4	A multiple source (or research) paper.

ENGH 0890 & 0990 FEMALE PREFERENCES: AVERAGES OF RANKINGS (RANGE 2.8)

First Preference	1.9	An essay which includes my personal experience.
Second Preference	2.8	A paper that is fiction or a creative story.
Third Preference	3.8	A persuasive or argument essay.
Fourth Preference	4.0	A summary of a reading.
Fifth Preference	4.3	An analysis of a reading assignment such as a short story.
Sixth Preference	4.7	A multiple source (or research) paper.

Theoretically, the range of possible rankings is 1 to 6 because "1" was the smallest and "6" the largest number that may have been used by respondents. However, because of the process of averaging, practically speaking, ordinal numbers do not emerge in averages. Considering the averages per assignments, subsequently, the female respondents' averages have this range: from 1.9, the lowest average, to 4.7, the largest average (a 2.8 range or difference). Male respondents' averages have this range: from 2.4, the lowest average, to 4.4, the largest average (a 2.0 range or difference). Analysis shows, consequently, that the male students were less likely to agree on their rankings than female students as demonstrated by the males' diminished range in comparison to the females' range. Explanation follows.

To explain, if all respondents were to randomly assign numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 to all the assignments and if the sampling size was large enough, the average ranking for all assignments would be the same: 3.5 or the average of numbers 1 to 6. (1+2+3+4+5+6 = 21, and 21divided by 6 = 3.5 as the average.) Conversely, when students assign 1s, or 2s, or 3s, etc. more often to the same assignments, the greater the range would be when all the assigned numbers are averaged per assignment. Subsequently, I conclude that because female respondents have a greater range in their averages, they were more likely to rank the assignments the same or with similar rankings. Conversely, because the males have a smaller range in their averages, they were less likely to rank the assignments the same. To simplify, females were more "like minded" as compared to males regarding their preferences for assignments. A second gender finding follows.

A review of Table 1 shows that the female respondents had greater agreement than males regarding the most preferable assignment: "an essay which includes personal experience." On average, female respondents ranked that assignment as 1.9; whereas, males respondents ranked it as 2.4. The difference between these average rankings is .5 and this is significant when we consider that the entire range for male averages was a measure of 2.0 and the entire range for female averages was a measure of 2.8.

Thinking in a similar way, a third gender finding emerges. The male respondents found this assignment more preferable than the female respondents: "a persuasive or argument essay." On average, males ranked that as 3.3; whereas, females ranked that as 3.8. Again, the significant difference between these average rankings is .5.

Data Analysis: Age

The average age among all the male students, who supplied useful data, was 22.9 years-of-age, and among the complementary female students, 21.3 years-of-age. On average, a male student was 1.6 years older than a female student. However, different "age gaps" existed among ENGH 0890 respondents as compared to ENGH 0990 respondents.

The age gap was larger among ENGH 0890 students who were also closer to traditional-age college students in general: 22 years-of-age was the average for ENGH 0890 males and 19.4 for ENGH 0890 females, creating a 2.6 difference in average ages.

For ENGH 0990 students, 23.5 years-of-age was the average among males and 21 among females, creating a 2.5 difference in average ages.

In other words, ENGH 0990 students seems to have more non-traditional students, as that term may be defined by age. Although these findings may change if the placement system was different in the future, for now faculty members may consider the possibility that more non-traditional aged students in ENGH 0990 may influence the pedagogy in that course, just as more traditional aged students in ENGH 0890 may influence the pedagogy in that course. At the same time, generally speaking, most male students are not entering our two courses after high school graduation: only female students in ENGH 0890 seem to be traditional students in terms of age.

Implications

How are we to explain male and female students generally agreeing on the "rank order" of the six assignments? I think that in this research that most of the students regardless of gender prefer to do easier written assignments as compared to more difficult ones. One implication of this research, therefore, may be that students prefer assignments that they perceive as easier. I think, student perceive that an essay that

includes personal experience and a fiction (or creative) story are easier papers to write as compared to a multiple source (or research) paper, the least preferred assignment. Unfortunately, one of the assignments that students seem to prefer, given the choices we presented, is the least likely to be assigned during their years in college: “a paper that is fiction or a creative story.”

The most relevant or practical-minded implications, however, may concern our current portfolio system. For instance, regarding ENGH 0890 portfolios, we may want to consider this preferred assignment: “an essay which includes my personal experience.” Specifically, as read on the attached requirements for ENGH 0890 portfolios, ENGH 0890 students are to provide teachers with “[e]vidence of ability to use personal experiences and/or opinions to support an academic thesis.” Should that be changed to the following requirement?

- Evidence of ability to use personal experiences to support an academic thesis.

Two basic reasons, among others, may exist for this change: (1) We assume that students write better papers if they write like the general genre of the paper, and (2) composition scholars know that across the curriculum, students are often asked to incorporate their personal experiences into an essay or into a research paper.

Regarding ENGH 0990, because more males exist in that course even compared to the majority of males existing in the college populace in general, we may want to consider this assignment, preferred by both males and females but more so by the males: “a persuasive or argument essay.” Why don’t we make that assignment a requirement in the ENGH 0990 portfolio?

As read on the attached requirements for ENGH 0990 portfolios, a multiple-source paper is emphasized but not a persuasive essay. However, as read in our application for NADE certification, our Department professes to follow a liberatory pedagogy. Such a pedagogy may be found in a persuasive essay as well as in a multiple-source paper. If we were to require a persuasive essay, moreover, that may suggest a somewhat arguable or debatable topic for the essay, and argument and debate – students representing themselves in the Academy – is a part of a liberatory approach to composition instruction. So to assign a persuasive essay as part of the required ENGH 0990 portfolio may be more true to what our students prefer to write and more true to an educational approach, we claim to have.