

“Trial and Tribulations, but also Joys and Jubilation”

Commentary on the
Writing Thought Process
of the
International Student

by

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Abstract

As the number of international students enrolled in North American universities continues to rise it is important that all instructors gain a more complete understanding of some of the issues that students face when they come to university. This article focuses on only one area, how students cope when learning how to write an academic essay, and some of the difficulties they face when confronted with new ways of teaching and learning. These new ways of learning include the language of instruction, the instructor expectations, the time they need to devote to their assignments, the need to become self-sufficient, and how teaching methods differ from what they were used to in their home countries. A short survey was conducted with 46 first-year international students at a college devoted to international students in North America to learn from the students themselves why they did or did not have problems writing their first university level essay. Their comments are interesting to read as it indicates their thought processes or, in some cases, their lack of any thought process that went into writing their essay.

I have been a teacher of writing for more years than I care to remember. If truth be told, it is a thankless job, but someone has to do it, and I admit that I enjoy it even on those days when I want to run screaming from my computer screen due to the horror of looking at yet one more essay where the student failed to follow even the most basic directions. I say thankless because it is the rare student or two who comes back to thank me for teaching them how to think about what they are writing and to thank me for teaching them how to make good writing decisions. I treasure those students who do that and I am thankful that I was able to make a difference in their lives. Nevertheless, sometimes I honestly wonder just what I am doing, and why I am doing it.

The course I teach is a first-year survey course that satisfies the writing requirement at the University of Manitoba. In order for students to get the writing credit, they have to write a minimum of 3000 words, which in my course translates into two 1500-word essays. Both essays are research papers that necessitate students completing research and then writing an essay that convinces the reader about their point of view, using evidence. The first essay I have them write is a persuasive essay where they get to choose their own topic. I subscribe to the belief that letting students choose their own topics will lead to more effective essays, since they would be motivated to learn more about their topic. In order for them to choose a topic, they have to think about what they are interested in. Unfortunately some students (5 out of 46) apparently had no interest in any topics and so asked friends and relatives for topic ideas. The end result is that these five students failed the essay, because they were not really interested in the topic they chose and, therefore, did not take the time to find out about what they were writing about by doing research. These five wrote opinion essays. The survey, on which this paper is based, was administered after the students had handed in their first essay.

The reason I decided to conduct the survey was that I was frustrated by the essay results and wanted to get the students' thoughts on how they went about writing the essay to see if I could get any insights into what went wrong in the execution of the actual writing. I have found, over the years, that students can define concepts such as thesis statements, what to include in a good introduction, etc., but they can't seem to take that knowledge and apply it to their own writing. What initially caused me to be so frustrated? It all started after I had finished grading all 46 persuasive essays written by the first-year international university students. I examined their results and, based on their marks, I would venture to say that 46% of them did not comprehend anything that I taught them in class, or could not apply it to writing an actual essay. Of the remaining students, 28% scored marks in the 50 to 59% range. Out of the 46% who failed, 14% did not write the essay due to them not being able to finish on time to hand them in, and 6% plagiarized their essays, apparently forgetting that they were not allowed to copy and paste, so that resulted in an automatic fail. On the positive side, 25% scored higher than 60% on the assignment; out of that 25%, 6% scored higher than 85%. Therefore, it was not all bad news. However, it was still disheartening when I graded their essays, because it seemed that, no matter how much information I provided or how much direction I gave them, the students still did not do well. The majority of the students (74%) failed or scored in the range of 50 to 60% which is still not a pass at the university, as a score of a minimum of 60% is needed to get credit in the course in order for them to be able to claim it as their writing credit when they continue their studies.

Whenever I get results like that—and it happens every year, at least for the first essay, I question myself. I ask myself what I could have done differently so that more students would be successful. As always, I was at a loss to explain the high failure rate this time. I know that some

students understand what I am teaching, because they do well, but that still leaves a large percentage of students who just do not seem to comprehend what I am teaching them. The questions that I have are, of course, related to what I have done in the course. I can't have any other questions, except my own, because I do not know how the students feel about the instructions that I have provided. Therefore, this year I decided to survey the students to find out why they got the grades they did and what we could do, together, going forward so that, in their next assignment, they would be more successful. I came to this conclusion, instead of continuing to bang my head against the wall, because all that would do is make a hole in my wall and give me a headache. It does not result in my coming up with a plan for future instruction, except to try to remember not to do it again—bang my head against the wall, that is. Trust me, when I say that it is never a good idea to bang one's head against a wall for the above-mentioned reasons. I knew I had to come up with a more effective plan, one that would actually result in better grades for my students and less of a headache for me.

I realized that, before I could analyze their answers to the survey, I had to evaluate my own method of teaching. For years, I have been promoting, among my colleagues, the benefits of direct explicit instruction for first-year university students in the basics of how to write an essay including how to write a proper thesis statement, how to formulate body paragraphs, how to write a good counter-argument, how to write an effective conclusion, how to fill in an outline, and how to format their essays. I teach each of these components, with examples that students can follow, and then provide practice in writing the various parts of the essay. That is why it is so discouraging to read their final submissions. It seems to me, when I grade their essays, that they did not learn anything, or at least did not remember learning anything. It would be easy to blame the students for not listening, but I don't think the issue is that simplistic, so I wanted to

find out what were the problems that the students were having, according to them. I surveyed all 46 students in my two sections, and asked them to respond to questions designed to find out what they did when they were writing their essays that led to their poor marks or, in some cases, their good marks. I was interested in discovering the writing thought-process of the international students, as expressed to me by the international students themselves. I hoped this would give me some insight into the difficulties they were having and what I could do to help them be more successful.

I have been teaching international students how to write academic essays for a number of years, and have found that it comes with its own trials and tribulations, but also its own joys and jubilations. I teach at an International College in Western Canada that is reserved for international students who did not qualify to enrol directly into university. These students have various reasons for not being accepted at the university of their choice. Some did not finish secondary school in their home country, others did not have enough proficiency in the English language to benefit from instruction when English is the language of instruction, and still others did not have the grades necessary to be accepted into a university. The program is, therefore, a bridge between their secondary schools and university. The college is partnered with the university, and the course I teach is a first-year university course that is accepted by the University of Manitoba for credit. If students do well in my course, they need a minimum of a C grade in order to transfer the credit to the university, which means they will have fulfilled their writing credit.

The students cannot take my course until their second year in the program, as the first year is dedicated to giving the students skills that they need before they can take my course. In the pre-requisite course, they learn the basics of grammatical writing—punctuation, tense,

spelling, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, paragraph development, sentence structure, and so on. All students are required to take this basic-skills course. They learn rudimentary note-taking skills and thesis statement development, as well. This pre-requisite course is designed to provide them with a foundation in writing that many of them need if they are to be successful in my course, where I do not have the time to teach them basic grammar lessons.

The problem is that, even though these students pass the foundation course, they are still ill-equipped to take my course. Many of the students still do not speak enough English to understand what I am saying. I can see it in their eyes as I am speaking. If they come to see me during my office hours, which is rare, I can see they have no clue what I am telling them. I have become adept at saying the same thing in different ways. I have also noticed that these same students can read better than they can speak, so I spend time when meeting with them writing things on a piece of paper for them to read. It is often the students who need the most help who are reluctant to come and ask me questions. I have noticed, over the years, that their reluctance to ask questions is often a result of their culture where they are trained not to “bother” their teachers by asking questions.

I always think that it is unfortunate that all international students are lumped together under the umbrella term *international students*, because that implies that they are all the same; most definitely, they are not all the same, because they come from so many different countries. Even students who come from the same country have not had the same educational experiences, and so cannot be grouped together in terms of ability. The students all speak different languages, they come from different school systems, they have different expectations, and they have different abilities. Therefore, it is difficult to know what information to provide and how much

information to provide. It is like walking a tight-rope where one false step, by either the students or the instructor, can result in a fall that leads inevitably to failure.

Over the years of teaching international students, I have found that students, for the most part, underestimate the amount of time it takes to write a successful essay. They leave things to the last minute, thinking that they can write an essay in a couple of hours. I must confess that when I was a first-year student, I thought the same way. The problem is that we, I and my students, were able to do that in our secondary schools. I remember clearly, in secondary school, writing my essays the night before they were due and still getting an A+. I don't know if my essays were that good, or if I was just being rewarded for handing something in that was readable. Now, that I reflect on it, I thought I was a great writer and, therefore, was filled with confidence when I started university. A look at my first essay grade in my English class soon made me realize that I had a great deal to learn about writing an essay. Some international students fall into this category. They consider themselves good writers based on their secondary-school experience, so they do not pay attention to what I am telling them, because they think they already know what they are doing when it comes to writing an essay. Just as I was, they are always shocked by the grade they get on their first essays. I am not worried about these students, because they do have a background in successful essay writing and they can learn from their errors on how to write a university essay. These students typically are the ones who end up getting B+ or A letter-grades in the course. It is the rest of the students who cause me sleepless nights.

So many first-year students, regardless of where they come from, are filled with false confidence that comes from years of handing in assignments after devoting little time to completing the assignment and still being successful. I think part of the problem is that students

are not used to writing research papers. They are used to handing in assignments that are filled with personal opinion and entries from Wikipedia and Google. Therefore, they do not take the time to understand that things are different in university and that the burden of proof is much greater in an academic essay than what they are used to. Certainly, that was the problem with my assignments in university until I learned what I needed to do to be successful.

Time Spent Writing the Essay

When I asked students how much time they devoted to writing their essay, the answers varied, as was expected. The amount of time the students spent writing their essays differed from some spending only a few hours to others spending a month. This was a very interesting question for me to have them answer, as I wanted to discover how much time students actually spend writing their essays according to their own estimates. As expected, the students who did not do well spent the least amount of time writing their essays.

- One student put it this way, when asked how much time he had spent writing his essay: “not enough”.
- Another student said that he “forgot the essay was due”, despite my mentioning it every class, and, therefore, he had “to write it the night before”.
- One student reported: “I spent about 4 days writing my essay which I am still writing because I have other courses, assignments, quizzes, and plus there are other things going on in my personal life”.
- One student gave various reasons for not having spent much time on his essay: “I spent only one week writing the essay. I had some family issues and I’m also managing work side by side so it was difficult to concentrate. I was also preparing for my driver’s license exam”.

- A student who did not do well stated, “I started a week before the due date because I had my instructor’s comments on my thesis and introduction and I assumed that I would be able to write the body paragraphs because I had those ready but I was wrong. I should have spent more time on the essay”.
- One of the students who did not hand in an essay said, “I just could not finish on time because I did not follow along in class when you asked us to hand in parts of the essay”.
- Another student who did not hand in his essay said, “I started the week before the due date. I started so late because I said to myself that writing essay will be easy like in high school, but it was not”.
- One of the students who failed said, “I began writing a long while back but was never able to finish the introduction. But I properly started writing 2 days before the essay was due. I forgot about the essay due to pressure and it may sound cliché but I couldn’t deal with the amount of mental strain so I decided to partition my tasks out”.

These are a few examples of the responses provided by the students who did not do well. The rest of the answers were along similar lines regarding not having the time to write the essay or, in some cases, forgetting about the deadline.

However, the interesting part was that, even though some students spent a month writing the essay, their marks did not reflect that: two of the students who reported spending a month writing failed their essays. The other four students who said they spent a month writing their essays all scored 80% and above. Thus the time spent writing the essay is obviously not the only factor in how students do when writing their essays. Of course, it could be that the two students did not actually spend as much time as they said they did. It is hard to know with self-reported

surveys, because I have to rely on their word. Nevertheless, in general, the students who spent a week or more on the essays did well, and the students who spent a few hours did not do well.

It is difficult to come to any sort of conclusion related to time spent writing the essay, since the grades were all over the place. A student who reported spending three weeks on the essay received a grade of 31%, while a student who reported having spent three hours got a 74%. Of course, that student who got the 74%, had handed in the different parts of the essay as we were doing them in class, so I think that student might have meant that he or she spent three solid hours writing the essay at one sitting before handing it in, but had likely spent a great deal of prewriting time that was not factored into the actual time spent writing the essay.

Did you submit your thesis, introduction paragraph, and body paragraph when you had the opportunity to do so? Why, or why not?

I, like my colleagues, do not want to see students fail. We are not in the business of failing students, unless we are left with no choice. The fact of the matter is that we want our students to succeed, and I believe I provide ample opportunities for them to succeed. I ask them to send me their thesis statements before they begin writing their essays. I would say that 20% of students take advantage of this opportunity. When asked why they did not take me up on my offer to check their thesis statements, students gave several different reasons for not doing it.

The majority said that they did not have it ready in time, and so could not submit it:

- “I was going to do it but then forgot. When you asked in class who was ready I tried to write down something and hand in but it was too late”,
- “I did it but forgot it at home”,
- “I didn’t even know it was due since I missed last class”,
- “I didn’t because I didn’t know what to do”,

- “No, I did not submit any of them because I used to procrastinate and later forgot about it”,
- “I submitted because I need to translate my Chinese concept into English, and make some changes in the essay so I can do well”,
- “I did not because I changed my topic and forgot to submit the new topic”, and
- “What’s a thesis statement again?”

Others operated under the mistaken impression that they already knew how to write a thesis statement and, therefore, did not have to submit it:

- “I already know how to write a thesis so didn’t bother handing in”,
- “I wrote thesis statements last year so there was no reason to hand in”, and
- “The thesis is what the essay is going to be about and I know how to do that”.

What I appreciate about international students is that, for the most part, they are very honest, as was typified by these responses:

- “I am just lazy and therefore did not bother writing the thesis statement to get checked before beginning to write my essay”,
- “I had to work last night and was too tired to write it”,
- “I have to work so didn’t bother doing it”,
- “I am a procrastinator so didn’t have it ready”
- “I can always write it when I am writing the essay”,
- “I did not submit the thesis, introduction and body paragraph when I had the opportunity to do so because I was still confused with which topic I should write and which topic will help me to brainstorm and find more information”, and

- “I didn’t submit the paragraphs one part because I’m shy the other part is because I’m afraid”.

These statements show how international students approach writing their essays and could explain why they have so many problems when writing a research paper. These are issues I cannot help them with. If they do not submit their work for review, or don’t see the benefit in doing so, I can do nothing about it. I am one of those instructors who thinks that every student wants to do well and would, therefore, take every opportunity to get feedback while writing the essay, but the survey responses indicate to me that this is not always the case. My purpose for the survey was that I was looking for suggestions from the students that would allow me to change my teaching methods, but these comments do not provide me with anything I can do in my classes. These are aspects that the students have to sort out for themselves.

The survey showed that the students who did well took advantage of the opportunity to get feedback before proceeding.

- As one student, who scored 85% on his essay said, “I submit everything I can. It is the only way I know if I am doing it right”.
- Another student who got 78% on the essay said, “I want to find out what the instructor thinks about my essay before I hand in. It is important because she is marking it”.
- A student who got 60% said, “I handed in my thesis but then was not able to hand in the other parts because I did not finish them in time. But, at least I got the thesis graded. The thesis is the important part of the essay”.
- One of the students got 84% on his essay and he said “Yes I submitted my thesis, introduction paragraph and body paragraph when I had the opportunity, the reason

- why is because it is beneficial to gain feedback on these aspects of the essay to make sure that I gain the highest mark possible without any errors”.
- A student who scored in the high eighties reported that “I submitted portions of my essay weekly as instructed as it was the most effective way of uncovering mistakes, in addition to understanding what goes into writing a good essay”.

These are a few of the responses I got and they are representative of the other students who also did well.

In analyzing the survey responses, I think it is fair to say that time management is a big problem for students. They do not seem to know how much time they need to devote to their assignments if they want to do well. They also do not keep track of when their assignments are due, which can cause problems when it is time to submit them. I constantly have students asking me when the assignment is due and I refer them to their syllabus, because I want them to become less dependent on their instructors and learn to take responsibility for their own work and progress through the course. This is an over-generalization, but many students are not used to taking responsibility for their own work. It is this genre of students who have the most excuses for why they could not submit the different parts of the essay:

- As one student said, “I work a lot. There are very few employees at my work and the boss expects me to work. I have to do my school work late at night after I get home from work”.
- Another student said, “It is not my fault that I didn’t do the work”. When students tell me this, I want to ask them whose fault it is if not theirs.
- Other students are more honest; as one student said, “I didn’t do it. I have no excuse. My bad”.

Those students make me smile. They are at least taking responsibility for not doing the work, rather than trying to blame someone else for their failure.

The conclusion that I came up with regarding the missed opportunity is that the majority of students (80%) did not take the time to hand in the different parts of the essay as we went along. They had their reasons, but what it came down to is that they just did not do it. Plain and simple. Many of the students (32 of 46) said they knew they should have handed in the thesis statement, but they didn't, and they had no good reason for not doing it. It is this attitude that I find troubling. If students are coming to university, my assumption is that they want to do well, but that does not appear to be the case in many instances. Either that, or they think they can be successful without doing any of the work associated with getting good grades and just expect their instructors to pass them, regardless of the quality of their submissions.

Did you attend class on the day when we discussed how to write the essay? Why, or why not?

My course is made up of two parts per week: in the lecture part, students learn strategies to help them be more successful learners at university—topics covered include metacognition, note-taking, how to improve memory, critical thinking; in the second part of the course, students learn how to write an academic essay. When asked if they attended the day I was teaching them how to write an academic essay, all of the students (100%) said yes, they did attend. However, their attendance record tells a different story. I take attendance during class and I know that the students who failed attended less than half of the classes, which helps to explain why they did not know what they were doing when it came time to write the essay.

It is impossible to get students to attend class if they do not want to. Also, it is telling that the students did not answer truthfully when asked if they attended class. I am unsure what

they hoped to accomplish by pretending they attended class when clearly they did not. I wonder if it is part of their learned helplessness for not taking responsibility for their actions. Even when presented with the evidence that they were not in class, they continued to deny it. They told me that they were there, but I must have missed recording their attendance. They told me they came late to class and, therefore, they were not there when I was taking attendance and so I missed recording their attendance. So, are they telling me is that the problem is mine as I must be a sloppy record keeper and a distracted instructor? This is yet another instance of them not taking responsibility for their own actions. When I ask students why they did not attend class, the three most common reasons given are these:

- "I had to work",
- "I was sick with a fever and could not get out of bed" and
- "I had to take care of some family business".

The following response is typical: "I know I missed a lot of classes but it's not my fault. It's my boss. He knows I have class but still I have to work". I detest being cynical, but it almost appears as if they have been coached to give these responses since I get these excuses the most, in various forms.

I then asked the students who come to class all the time, why they attend class. The majority of the students who attend regularly said that they have to attend if they want to learn how to do their assignments:

- One student said, "If I don't go to class I don't know what is going on. I will fail if I don't attend class".
- Another student said, "I go to class to learn. No class, no learning".

- And one of the students said, “I want to be better at writing. The only way to do that is to go to class”.
- And still another one said, “I can’t fail. My parents don’t have the money for me to take the class again. I need to pass so I come to class”.

It is these students who do well in the course. As for the rest of them, I sometimes ask myself why these students are even attending university, since that does not seem to be their priority based on the excuses they give for not attending class.

Perhaps this is where listening and paying attention comes in. It is obvious that most of the students (74%) do not encode any of the information I am discussing. Without encoding the information, they cannot remember it when it comes time to use it in their actual assignments. I give handouts, go over them, and then I find the handouts on their desks when they leave the classroom. It is this apparent lack of attention to detail that leads to a failed paper. When I teach my classes and look around the room, I see that many of the students never take notes. Some come ill-prepared and do not even bring paper or pen to class. When I tell them they should be taking notes, they have to borrow the supplies from other students. It is this complete disregard for what they can learn if they only paid attention that can lead to the results they get on their essays.

When I asked the students if they thought they paid attention in class, the students for the most part said they pay attention in class, but I realized that this was an ambiguous question. The term *pay attention in class* will mean different things to different students. Paying attention in class translated to taking notes for some students; other students did not quantify what they meant by paying attention. The students are attending class, but not really attending class—if you know what I mean. The act of learning is more than just sitting in class and looking at the

instructor. I have a very strict no-phone policy in my room and I have asked students to leave the room if they disregard my rules; so they are all looking at me when I am teaching, but they are not really there. They are perhaps thinking of what they will do once they leave class, maybe they are thinking of what they will have for lunch, or they are thinking about what they are missing on their social media accounts, but they are definitely not thinking about what I am teaching them. I realize this is an oversimplification, but how else to explain the 74% who did not follow basic instructions that I painstakingly went over in class and which led me to the next question I asked in the survey?

Are you able to follow the directions taught in class? Why, or why not?

This question was designed to find out what issues existed, if any, as to why the students did not follow the directions provided in class. To be perfectly honest, I thought the students would say that the instructions were hard to follow, which is why they did so poorly on their essays. However, that was not the case. They all (100%) said the instructions provided were very clear and that the instructor, that's me, went out of my way to teach them the basics. Of course, this could be the same as the students telling me that they attended all the classes. If they indeed were able to follow the directions, then what went wrong?

The good students said:

- "The instructions are good. If I have questions I ask in class",
- "The teacher goes over everything many times",
- "The teacher is very patient. She explains everything no matter how many times we ask the same question",
- "I have not had many problems in following the instructions because I read the textbook before class",

- and “I was able to follow directions taught in class, because the directions were laid out and explained to us clearly”.

The students who did not do well said,

- “I thought I understood but looking at my grade I didn’t”,
- “I knew how to write a thesis but it was marked wrong” (as an aside this student did not know how to write a thesis),
- “I listened but couldn’t remember later”,
- “Most of the time [I understand], but sometimes I may not. Because my English is not very good, sometimes I may miss some things the teacher said”,
- “No I do not pay attention because I space out a lot and before I notice I’ve already missed a lot of information”,
- “I try my best to follow instructions taught in class, but sometimes there are a lot of instructions so I forget”, and
- “I forgot how to write an intro. I couldn’t find any information and so looked at the internet”.

A follow-up to the last comment is that the textbook I use devotes a whole chapter to introductions, and I provide a handout on how to write an introduction that is also posted online. In other words, the student had many places to have found the information. The student could have also emailed me, or come to my office hours. Of course, this was not possible in this case, since the student admitted to writing the essay the night before it was due.

As mentioned previously, I believe in direct explicit instruction when teaching, and the students all said they understood what I was teaching. They told me that my words are easy to understand and I provide many examples. Therefore, I have no explanation as to why they did

not incorporate the lessons they learned when completing their assignment. I could take a bow here and say, well, obviously I am doing a good job in the classroom, and just leave it there, but that is not how I operate. Something must be missing between what I say and what the students understand. This is a question for another survey. If the students are saying that I am clear with my directions, I should have asked a follow-up question as to why, then, do they have so many problems when writing their essays.

Why do you think you got the grade you did? Explain.

This question was designed to get the students to self-evaluate. I teach my students how to be critical thinkers and to be able to come to a conclusion based on the evidence provided. I want them to evaluate their own essays and not just look at the grade they received. The majority of students (75%) said they deserved the grade they got. The ones who failed said they did not put enough time into doing the assignment. They reported that they waited until the last minute and, therefore, did not have time to do research properly and write the essay. Other students said they had no idea why they got the grade they did because they put a great deal of effort into writing the essay. Putting in effort is ambiguous and can't be quantified. I do not even know what they consider effort, which is why I do not grade effort.

- One student said he deserved the grade he got because "I did not organize my paragraphs well enough and the conclusion was not clear".
- Another student said, "I got the grade I did because of no previous planning, plus I only write once a week so my ideas are all over the place".
- A student who did not do well stated, "I think I got this grade because I did not follow all the guidelines strictly as I might not have been aware of all of them".

- Another student said, “My grade was not as good as I expected and I think the reason is I did not have a good thesis statement, strong evidences and fluently [sic] counter-argument”.
- A student who failed said “It took me one day to finish this essay. One day is too short for an essay, so I didn't get a high score for this essay”.
- Another student who did not do well said, “I think I got the grade that I did because my essay wasn't up to the mark. I didn't put enough time, keeping in mind that I am not good with writing essays and I struggle a lot with anxiety”.
- Yet another student said, “I think I got the grade I did because I didn't write my essay in time and I didn't take advantage of the times I was offered to get some feedback on what I was writing”.

These responses tell me that the students are aware, for the most part, of why they did not do well in their assignment. The good news is that these same students do much better on their second essay, because it appears that they do learn from their errors.

The students who did well said they were happy with their grades and that one of the reasons they did well is that they handed in the different parts of the essay as they went along:

- “I took advantage of the teacher's comments and made changes”,
- “I handed in everything because I wanted to do well in the essay”,
- “If I didn't hand in I wouldn't know what I did wrong”,
- “It's good to hand in the different parts so I knew what I was doing wrong”,
- “Producing both an outline and a draft helped me realize how meticulous the process of writing an essay is. It was only possible with constant effort, some blood and

- tears, and lots of advice from the instructor. Nevertheless I am quite relieved that my efforts paid off”,
- “I got what I deserved because I invested my time, effort, and attention. If I hadn’t then I would have failed”,
 - “I think I got the grade that I did because I had attended all the Writing labs and had taken every opportunity possible to send my work in order to make sure that my essay was going on the right track” and,
 - A student who did well on the essay commented that “I got this grade because I think I did well in following instructions and included what is asked for in the essay. I put in effort to find scholarly sources that can support my claim. It took me a lot of time in doing research about this topic, reading articles, and browsing the websites for more reliable information”.

These comments were self-affirming for me because it told me that at least some of the students were actually listening to directions and doing what I expected them to do and were able to take advantage of my instructions.

Grammar

I did not ask them about grammar specifically, but many indicated that this was an area that they had to improve if they wanted to score higher on their next assignment. I explain to the students that the total grades given for grammar are only 10% of the total essay, so they should spend more time thinking about writing a coherent essay with evidence, rather than worrying about their grammar. I will admit that the grammar can be an issue, especially because they do not know the basics of sentence construction, capitalization, punctuation, and informal language.

Despite their foundation course, which I explained earlier, many students still make very basic grammar mistakes in their writing.

Punctuation is another issue with international students. Ending a sentence with a period and beginning a new sentence with a capital letter is taught to Canadian children from a young age so it is always a shock to me when I find students who do not know basic grammar rules. In my course, I do not have time to teach grammar, as the students are expected to know grammar rules before they take my course. However, this is not always the case. Due to their inability to follow basic grammar rules, the students' writing is often difficult to understand. I know I said that the grammar is not a priority in my class, but it becomes an issue when the grammar and sentence structure makes understanding their essays difficult.

To reiterate, the conclusion I came to is that they did not seem to pay any more attention in their other class than they did in my class. One cannot make students learn if they are not interested.

Conclusion

Just as I said at the start of this article, each student is unique and there are no easy fixes when it comes to teaching international students how to write an academic essay. It appears from my survey that students are not good evaluators of their own capabilities. They think they know more than they do and, therefore, they feel as though they do not have to pay attention to the instructions, or do not have to ask questions to clarify what they have to do. I realize that it is not possible to gain an understanding of students' writing processes from such a short survey, although I think that the findings can be extrapolated to larger groups of students. I also know from experience that what these students went through is what almost all of my students

experience year to year. In their naïve conceit, they think they will be successful just doing what they have always done.

The good news is that those students who did well said that they followed directions, they started early enough to be able to take advantage of my comments, and they sent me emails if they did not understand what they had to do. In other words, they were active learners and made good decisions when writing their essays. The students who did not do well missed out on these parts of the process. Another positive main point is that, for their second essay, they all did much better. It seems that, once they write the first essay, if they understand their errors and can adjust, they end up with better marks than on the first essay, and thereby demonstrate some learning.

Another issue is their apparent lack of ability to listen and follow instructions. So many of the issues I identify on their second essay when grading are the same issues I have identified when they handed in their first. These are the obvious issues with formatting—things such as title pages, running-heads, page numbers, double spacing, in-text citations, and the references page. I teach APA formatting, and so they have to follow those guidelines. I patiently teach them formatting, I point out the errors they are making in their essays the first time they hand them in, but then I notice the same errors in their second essays. It appears that they do not even look at the assignments they get back except to check their marks. This omission, in effect, takes away a great deal of the learning that they could be doing if they only spent some time reviewing what they did wrong in the first place. Again, some students do that with great success, but the majority (65%) do not comprehend what needs to be done to raise their grades.

When I mention to students that perhaps they should evaluate what mistakes they made, my well-intentioned advice goes nowhere, or at least appears to go nowhere. I don't mind

admitting that I get very frustrated when I see the same mistakes over and over. What that tells me is that the students never look at their papers once they get them back. As mentioned, they do not appear to take advantage of my comments. When I discuss this in class, it falls, for the most part, on deaf ears. Also, when I tell them about it, I feel like I am preaching to the choir as the only ones who listen to me are already evaluating and fixing errors. It is only once they get their grade back that they come to the realization that, maybe, they should have paid more attention to what was being taught. By that time, it is too late.

What have I personally learned from this short survey? I have learned to keep doing what I am doing. The students who do well all say that my instructions are clear and, since I believe in direct explicit instruction, I will continue to offer that in class. I will continue to remind students that they should be taking notes when I am teaching, but beyond that it is up to the students. I cannot learn for them, although I sometimes think that is what students expect. Teaching and learning are two parts of the education process. I did not learn anything from the survey that I can do differently in my classroom, except to keep doing what I already do. I hope that the students who completed the survey will now know the importance of following instructions and evaluating what they did to earn the grade they did. I can only hope.