

A Synopsis of “The Effects of Incorporating a Word Processor into a Three Year Writing
Program”

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Abstract

In this article I will discuss and summarize the research article, “The Effects of Incorporating a Word Processor into a Three Year Writing Program.” I will review the approach taken by the researcher of the paper, and list the main conclusions drawn by the author of the paper. I will also provide my opinion of the article.

A Synopsis of “The Effects of Incorporating a Word Processor into a Three Year Writing Program”

This article is a brief synopsis of a research paper I was asked to review for ETEC 500, an e-course available through the University of British Columbia. I will summarize the main points of the article, then I hope to adequately describe my observations of the article, and come to my own conclusions of the validity of the argument of the authors, Natalie Beck and Tony Fetherston (2003).

In the article, “The Effects of Incorporating a Word Processor into a Three Year Writing Program” (Beck and Fetherston, 2003), the authors disseminate research claiming to prove that word processors positively affect students' self-esteem about the writing process. The authors then claim:

Incorporating a word processor into a writing program, in this investigation, assisted the students by enhancing their creativity, keeping them motivated, improving their style, and enabling them to produce a more comprehensive narrative (Beck and Fetherston, 2003).

The authors first begin by summarizing the research of other authors using a long stream of quotes from various sources. They continue by exploring the ramifications of using a word processor, and rationalizing their experiment. In their introduction they extol the virtues of word processors and describe many of the benefits of using computer software to aid writing. Following their lengthy introduction, the authors elaborate on their research process, including their method, their criteria for comparing traditional writing methods with word processors, and

other typical research steps. They then explain their results, breaking their work into a series of research questions, each one of which they answer at some length. They then conclude:

The word processor assisted the students by enhancing their creativity, keeping them motivated, improving their style, and producing a more comprehensive narrative (Beck and Fetherston, 2003).

The basic research approach taken by Beck and Fetherston (2003) is to collect many different types of data from direct observation of the students: Interviews and observations formed the main data gathering techniques. In addition, field notes, document analysis and evaluation of writing samples, provided additional data to assist in the construction of the individual case studies (Beck and Fetherston, 2003). In this way, they hope to construct an argument justifying the use of word processors in the classroom.

The main conclusions that Beck and Fetherston (2003) come to are; students' self-esteem improves while writing using a word processor, students are able to alleviate their concerns about producing neat work since their word processed work looks professional, students feel that writing on a computer is a more fluid process which allows for the making and subsequent correcting of errors.

In my opinion, Beck and Fetherston (2003) make some mistakes in their research, and in the presentation of their research. First, their sample size is far too small to justify any generalizations about students and the effects of using a word processor in writing. Second, the researchers should have tried other alternative techniques for teaching writing and compared these other techniques as well. Finally the researchers use a subjective comparison rubric that

involves the use of undefined terms such as “creative” and “topic sentences are clear” (Beck and Fetherston, 2003).

One major flaw I see in the presentation of the research is the enormous amount of time spent justifying the use of a word processor *before* the results of the study are known. This immediately makes me suspect Beck and Fetherston (2003) of a bias in their paper. Since this bias seems to exist before the research has even begun, because of the structure of the paper, it suggests to me that this study will undoubtedly involve observer bias and flawed methodology.

I also noticed that the authors make extensive use of quotes and references throughout their paper, and lack their own voice in much of the writing. Too often they draw upon the authority of another author rather than their own authority and this does much to weaken their argument.

Another flaw I see in their writing is the conclusions section of the paper is too succinct, perhaps because too many of their conclusions have been drawn before the paper is complete!

If I were to conduct a similar research study, I would do the following; use a larger sample size, vary my comparison between more traditional writing methods and some new writing methods available today (such as Wikipedia and similar resources), be more careful with my comparison rubric, and write my paper with more of a focus on what I discovered rather than what other experts in the field know.

References:

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