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Engaging Feedback and Revision – EPI Grant Report

<u>Goals of project</u>

In Fall 2016, supported by an Engaged Practices Initiative Grant, faculty at the University of Vermont were granted access to try *Eli Review*, a web-based technology which structures and guides iterative peer review practices. Our goal was to increase the quality of student writing overall by developing feedback-rich, revision-rich classes in which the feedback load is shared among students. We sought to use *Eli Review* to help teach faculty:

(1) how to give more useful feedback

(2) how to coach students on giving more useful feedback, promoting deeper engagement, better revision, and stronger writing – without increasing faculty workload.

<u>Implementation and Outcomes</u>

In fall 2016, 12 faculty tried *Eli Review* in a total of 20 courses (5 faculty used *Eli* in multiple courses), totaling 527 students. As projected, we had broad disciplinary participation, with 6 faculty from English, and 1 each from Biological Sciences, Communicative Disorders, Linguistics, Philosophy, Political Science, and Psychology. All levels were represented, with 12 lower-division courses, 7 upper-division courses, and one graduate course. Six courses fulfilled the FWIL requirement, and 5 courses were in the Honors College.

With these participants, we report the following outcomes:

1. Faculty deeply engaged with *Eli Review*. *Eli's* pedagogy encourages faculty to scaffold their writing projects into short writing tasks, tightly focused targeted reviews, and articulated plans for revision. The balance of writing, reviewing, and revising tasks assigned can be an indicator of faculty insights into the teaching and learning of writing; if writing tasks far outweigh review tasks, for example, then faculty are not engaging with the write/review/revise cycle advocated by *Eli*. Aggregated, our faculty's balance was remarkably even, with 112 writing tasks, 108 review tasks, and 92 review/resubmit tasks. If we exclude faculty who assigned fewer than 5 cycles, the numbers are even closer: 88 writing / 91 reviewing / 86 revising.

2. Faculty gained meaningful insights into levels of student understanding and their writing, responding, and revising practices. See below.

3. Students engaged in substantive peer interactions with writing, responding, and revising. The even balance of writing, reviewing, and revising tasks reported in outcome 1 (above) indicates that students in these sections had routine, criteria-based engagement with their peers throughout repeated assignment cycles. Unfortunately, the metadata currently available to us does not permit a qualitative analysis of students' textual interactions with one another, nor the changes in their metalanguage over time – two indicators we had hoped to study. Nonetheless, we can confidently assert that students did engage in repeated peer review activities and interactions.

Impact

Benefits, as articulated by faculty participants.

- *Clarification of instructor expectations*. Faculty generally agreed that *Eli* helped them clarify and convey their expectations to students.

- *Ability to direct student attention to positive models of peer review*. Students rated one another's reviews, and excellent class discussion emerged in response to data displays for given review tasks. The ability to pull out trends in reviews, and the ability to show the class samples of review comments, opened up possibilities.

- *Scaffolding to "train [students] up as reviewers*." Students became more skilled at using the language of the course, becoming better reviewers and better revisers. Faculty found that articulating expectations in language that students could understand was quite useful.

- *The use of trait identification.* Asking students to identify whether particular traits are present or absent in student work is a simple element of *Eli Review* that had a big impact. Constructing trait identification tasks helped several faculty members define their own expectations, and faculty reported that student use of trait identification helped to guide attention to what mattered.

- *Overall influence on instructor responding*. "I was less like Ms. Grundy," one instructor reported, as *Eli Review* pushed his commenting more towards key traits and less toward copy-editing. "It made me a better writing teacher after 47 years of teaching writing."

- *The ability to develop their own skills*. One faculty member noted, "I'm ready for the next level." Working with *Eli* supports faculty reflection, and the project cohort provided good company for faculty seeking to increase peer engagement. Faculty enjoyed this focused

opportunity for improving their teaching. Those who continued in the spring semester reported that they were better *Eli* users the second time around. Those who used Eli in the fall but could not in the spring have indicated that they know of adjustments they will make when they teach with Eli again.

- *The development of effective rhythms*. Faculty noted the importance of timing *Eli Review* activities. Attention to *Eli* cycles helped faculty consider the rhythms for timing effective assignments and responses.

Challenges, as articulated by the faculty

- *Technical challenges at the intersection of Eli Review's user interface and the conceptual design of peer review tasks*. While *Eli Review* as a platform is quite stable, some participants had moments of frustration as they translated their vision into *Eli*. One instructor who wanted the *same number of reviews* assigned to each student, a technological and mathematical impossibility. Others requested seamless synching with Blackboard's grade book. Several instructors struggled with managing late-working students and the effects of late participation on other students' work.

- *Learning to use debriefing strategies to coach students*. *Eli Review* provides copious data for faculty, and learning how to download and interpret this data is an undertaking that requires time. Most (but not all) faculty participants who were brand-new to *Eli* found that debriefing was something they aspired to spend more time on.

- *Understanding how to balance instructor and peer response*. One participant reported frustration that his workload had not lessened with *Eli Review*.

<u>Project status and future plans</u>

Faculty response to *Eli Review* was uniformly positive: every faculty member who participated in the project in some way (even those who only participated in early conversations about *Eli Review*) found that the discussions of *Eli pedagogy* were useful, even if *Eli technology* was not something they saw themselves ready to use right now. As noted above, faculty who used *Eli Review* plan to do so again in the future. The fall pilot was deemed successful enough that FWIL decided to fund a second semester of free access. Issues we must address as we move forward include:

- *Funding*: Free access was crucial for encouraging faculty participants to try *Eli*. Some faculty report that they are unlikely to assign *Eli Review* again if students have to pay for it. We had assumed that the modest subscription cost ($25 for 6 months; $40 for one year) which is far less than most textbooks would be viable for students to absorb, but until *Eli's* user base is expanded, cost remains a barrier.   We plan to consult with faculty further to better understand attitudes about cost. The cost of institutional subscriptions in bulk lowers the per-student cost, and should be pursued.

- *Scaffolding*: *Eli* offers faculty the opportunity to consider how they scaffold student learning, as well as the opportunity to scaffold their own work on responding to student writing. There are many opportunities for WID and FWIL to continue conversations with faculty about how the role of peer review supports student progress towards course objectives.

- *Revision plans*: Most faculty reported that they wanted to make better use of the revision plans. (Melissa Meeks from *Eli Review* shared that revision plans are generally

underutilized; our participants did assign them at a high rate but are interested in improving their functionality). The most recent *Eli Review* blog addresses revision plans; we are well-poised to take advantage of the materials that *Eli Review* has put out in any continuing workshops offered here at UVM.

We view the *Eli Review* project as a tremendous success, in that participating faculty embraced the invitation to ask students to have focused conversation on small bits of writing, looking at important criteria for success in moving to the next stage of understanding. *Eli Review*'s Fall 2016 recap noted that our cohort had "atypically deep use in the first semester" of a project. Faculty enthusiasm overrode the challenges faced. Institutionally, we need to address the challenge of *Eli's* cost as a barrier to continued adoption. Based on what we have learned from faculty, we have not yet reached a critical mass of expert *Eli* users to warrant switching to a student-paid funding model. It is also clear from our survey data that the grant funding lowered barriers to faculty trying *Eli* for the first time and to continuing with it in the future. We recommend other funding mechanisms be sought while *Eli Review* continues to gain ground, in hopes that the university-wide technology committee might see *Eli* as an inexpensive but high-impact product worth funding through student technology fees.

We are encouraged by the insights generated through this project and grateful to the many participants who took the chance to work on this project with us. We also extend our appreciation for the EPI Grant in making this pilot possible.

Appendix: Faculty Development for Eli Review

Our project provided robust and personalized support for faculty teaching with Eli Review:

- In April 2016, "Teaching with Oooomph" meetings with Jeff Grabill, developer of *Eli Review*.

- Short online professional development modules offered by Eli let participants opt in to experiencing Eli as a student and to see an expert teacher debriefing with students. While this experience was not mandatory for our cohort, most of our participants opted in to the online module at some point during Summer 2016. This proved to be helpful preparation; 7 UVM faculty members took advantage of this option (although only 2 followed through on participating in the pilot)

- In August 2016, we hosted *Eli Review*'s director of professional development, Melissa Meeks, for a day. Melissa's half-day workshop (held once in the morning and once in the afternoon) provided an intensive introduction to *Eli's* pedagogical framework and allowed participants to begin designing tasks. 14 faculty participated.

- Several drop-in faculty work sessions hosted by Libby and/or Susanmarie in the fall and early January. These events offered faculty the chance to get one-on-one assistance from Libby or Susanmarie, and to compare notes with other instructors

- As-needed consultations with Libby and Susanmarie. Several participants reached out to one or the other of us as they confronted particular issues while using *Eli*. Sometimes, we connected with *Eli Review's* technical support; other times, we advised on pedagogical possibilities or technical workarounds.