Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Increasing the Authenticity of Group Assignments in an Online Research Course May Lead to Higher Academic Achievement

A Review of:
Finch, J. L., & Jefferson, R. N. (2013). Designing authentic learning tasks for online library instruction. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *39*(2), 181-188. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2012.10.005

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Abstract

Objective – To explore what impact assigning authentic tasks to students deliberately grouped by their majors in an online library research course has on student perceptions of teaching quality (teaching presence) and satisfaction.

Design – Empirical comparative study.

Setting – Medium-size (10,500 full-time students) liberal arts college in the United States of America.

Subjects – 33 undergraduate students enrolled in a library research course.

Methods – The study focusses on two sections of a one-credit online library research course taught by library faculty. The 17 students in the Spring "express" section were randomly assigned to groups and asked to complete a group annotated bibliography project using MLA style (Class Random). The 16 students registered in the Summer section of the same course were grouped by their majors, and asked to complete a modified version of the annotated bibliography group project in which they were asked to identify and then utilize the citation style most appropriate for their discipline (Class Deliberate). Students in Class Deliberate also received instruction around the role of subject specific citation styles in scholarly communication. Both sections completed a final assignment in which they developed a portal of resources to support their future studies or careers. All 33 students in both sections were invited to complete a modified online version of the Community of

Inquiry (COI) survey consisting of 16 questions relating to student perceptions of the course's teaching and cognitive presences. Questions relating to social presence were not administered. The final grades awarded to all students in both sections were also analyzed.

Main Results – A total of 59% of the students in Class Random (10/17) and 67% of the students in Class Deliberate (11/16) completed the online survey. There were no statistically significant differences in the survey responses between the two sections with both groups of students rating the instructor's teaching presence and the course's cognitive presence highly. Only 40% of the respondents from Class Random and 46% from Class Deliberate agreed that working with peers facilitated their learning. The mean final grade received by students in Class Deliberate was 95.27 versus 86.15 in Class Random, a statistically significant difference ($p<0.10$).

Conclusion – Assigning authentic tasks has a positive impact on academic achievement, but differences in course timing and the structure and the higher number of seniors enrolled in Class Deliberate may partly account for the differences in the mean grade. The COI theoretical framework is useful for understanding the complex multidisciplinary nature of information literacy instruction, particularly in an online environment. Areas for future research include the role of social presence and its relationship to the age of participants in online library instruction.

Commentary

This study illustrates the challenges faced by those involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). In their discussion of the "Fallacies of SoTL," Grauerholz and Main (2013) write, "There is no such thing as a control group when it comes to research on a classroom" (p. 155). A classroom is not a petri dish in which exposures can be easily isolated and controlled. The unpredictable mix of student personalities and levels of experience in each course is likely to have an impact on the success (or failure) of any intervention (Grauerholz & Main, 2013).

Finch and Jefferson acknowledge many of the confounding factors that may have influenced levels of student success and satisfaction, many of which were beyond their ability to control without jeopardizing the student experience. However, some decisions regarding study design undermine the study's conclusions. For example, the decision to compare two different sections of students that took place at different points in the year diminishes the study's internal validity (Bartsch, 2013). More detail on the length of each term (i.e., what made the Spring section "express") and a clear statement that both sections were taught by the same instructor would help readers determine how comparable the two groups truly were. The use of the final course grade rather than the specific grade awarded for the assessment also makes it more difficult to link student performance to the increased authenticity of the assignment.

The use of the previously validated COI survey allows for easier comparison of the findings to other studies. The decision to remove the questions on social presence in the version administered to students is surprising, particularly when the intervention under study involved group work. Only 40% of the students in Class Random and 46% in Class Deliberate felt that working with their peers helped their learning on the one question included on group work. This is such a departure from the otherwise positive ratings of the course that it raises questions about what data the questions on social presence might have elicited if they had been included. That less than half of the students saw value in working with their peers may also point to a need to revisit the group assignment design or how it is framed within the course.

Finch and Jefferson's overall openness around the limitations of their study design and results are helpful for readers looking to determine the applicability of the results to their own teaching contexts or considering their own research into teaching and learning. Their discussion of the COI framework and how the online research course was designed to highlight teaching presence may be of

interest to those involved in the delivery of online information literacy instruction.

References

Bartsch, R. A. (2013). Designing SoTL studies—Part I: Validity. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *2013*(136), 17-33. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/tl.20073

Grauerholz, L., & Main, E. (2013). Fallacies of SOTL: Rethinking how we conduct our research. In K. McKinney (Ed.), *The scholarship of teaching and learning in and across disciplines* (pp. 152-168). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.