

Protocol Summary

A Comparison of Methods Aimed at Enhancing Student Engagement in an ECR Course

Purpose:

According to the 9th annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2011) over 6.1 million students took at least one online course during the Fall of 2012, representing an increase of 560,000 students over the previous year. Almost 1/3 of all college students now take at least one course online.

Blended or hybrid learning, which has been defined as a course in which 30 to 79% of the proportion of content is delivered online, has also grown dramatically in recent years, although at a somewhat slower rate (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). A recent meta-analysis demonstrated that blended/hybrid classes (but not fully online courses) are associated with stronger learning outcomes than face-to-face instruction alone (Means et al., 2010). Blended courses also appear to enhance a sense of classroom community more than online or face-to-face instruction (Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of pedagogical recommendations regarding best practices in blended learning, including the development of *the Blended Toolkit*, an online compendium of effective practices, processes, research, faculty development, model courses, and evaluation resources (UCF & AASCU, 2013). Although these resources are extremely helpful, it can be difficult to synthesis the diversity of available information and translate it into specific practices. In an attempt to identify commonalities across these various guidelines, McGee and Reis (2012) analyzed 67 published descriptions of best practices in blended/hybrid learning. One consistent finding is that varied interactivity, involving instructor to student, student to student, and student to other resources is perceived to be key to student engagement in blended/hybrid courses.

Blended/hybrid offerings at Suffolk University include those courses that meet the Expanded Classroom Requirement (ECR). Classes in this category include a wide variety of educational experiences that place students in a professional or service setting into the classroom context. ECR classes typically include a journaling requirement that encourage instructor-to-student interaction. Students are assigned readings and projects that require them to interact with resources. However, consistent with research that has demonstrated the difficulties of motivating student participation in online discussions (e.g., Balaji & Ckkrabarti, 2010), stimulating student-to-student interaction in a blended/hybrid ECR class can present some challenges. Given the evidence that learner-to-learner interaction can predict course satisfaction more strongly than learner-to-instructor interaction (Jung et al., 2002; Rodriguez, 2006), research into methods that enhance such interaction is critical.

The Blackboard Learning Management System can be used to promote learner-to-learner collaboration and interactions through activities such as class and small group discussion (Woods et al., 2004). Research suggests that classroom community is enhanced in courses where discussions are graded and in which students posted on average over three messages a week (Rovai, 2003). Additionally, detailed instructions guiding discussion and regular instructor feedback encourage greater participation (e.g., Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010).

The goal of the present study is investigate the impact of guided small group online discussions in enhancing classroom community and improving professional development among students enrolled in a psychology internship course.

Participants

All students, aged 18 or older, enrolled in Psychology Internship (Psy 350a and Psy 350b) during the Spring 2014 and Summer 2014 will be eligible for participation. No more than 100 students will participate.

Procedure

Students will be provided with an Informed Consent Form (ICF) describing the goals of the study and the nature of their involvement. (see Appendix A). In order to minimize coercion, students will be invited to participate in the study by a Research Assistant (RA) without the instructor/Principal Investigator in the room. The RA will explain the details of the study, underscoring the voluntary nature of participation. After students have the opportunity to read the ICF and ask questions, students will be instructed to either sign the form (if they wish to participate) or leave it blank (if they do not) and to place it into a sealed envelope. This envelope will be collected and stored by the RA until the semester is over and grades have been submitted. At that point, the investigator will “break the blind” by opening the envelopes and determining whose data can be used for research purposes.

This study has a quasi-experimental design in that we will be examining the impact of two approaches to encouraging classroom community and professional development, but students will not be randomly assigned to conditions. Instead, students in Section A will be taught using a new guided small group discussion method in addition to less frequent traditional journal writing assignments while students in Section B will be assigned the usual frequency of traditional journal assignments (responses to prompts tying together readings and internship placement experiences that are shared between the instructor and single student).

On the last day of class, students will be asked to complete the Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002). The CCS (see Appendix B) is a self-report questionnaire with demonstrated psychometric properties that consists of 20 items that examine perceived sense of social and learning community in a classroom setting. Participants rate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) Likert scale.

Additionally a randomly selected sample of student writing (from journals and discussion board posts) will be selected for analysis. The research assistant, who will be blind to the hypotheses of the study as well as the condition of different

participants, will code de-identified writing samples, derived from the student journal. Consistent with general practices in qualitative research:

- (1) 20% of the writing samples will be used for open coding/codebook development
- (2) 20% will be used to refine the codes
- (3) After applying a completed codebook to 20% of the cases, the codebook will be examined for redundant codes (that can be condensed) and general codes (that can be further split and defined)
- (4) The remaining 40% of the samples will be coded

Protected Health Information

No protected health information will be collected

Incentives

No incentives for participation will be provided.

References

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