

Title: Improving Daily Writing Assignments, Encouraging Study Groups, and Clarifying the Structure of Daily Class Discussions

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Summary

My course redesign focused on an introduction to the Humanities course. Through the integration of study groups into daily classroom activities, my aim was to encourage students to use and value social learning.

Background

In his 2013 book *Social: Why our Brains are Wired to Connect*, Matthew Lieberman discusses the human need for social connection. Lieberman explores the fundamental need that humans have for social connection and how that connection is essential for human development and flourishing.

With this inspiration, this Collaborative Humanities Redesign Project deliberately encourages students to use and value social learning. The project encourages such social learning with the implementation of study groups as part of daily classroom activity. The course also uses extra credit on exams to encourage study groups. The project features the redesigning of a daily writing assignment. In fact, the lion's share of this portfolio explores that redesign, provides data about it, and discusses the results of the redesign. Finally, the new daily writing assignment provides a more deliberate daily class discussion structure. All three elements are crucial to how the project encourages the social learning the people like Lieberman commend so highly. I teach an introduction to the Humanities course at Elon University, a small, private institution in Elon, North Carolina. My course introduces literature, visual art, architecture, music, film and television arts to about 30 students in each section. The students are mostly first-year students, and the course theme is laughter.

To encourage pre-class preparation and reflection, in the fall of 2014 I implemented a daily writing assignment called "The Coolest Thing I Learned." This open-ended assignment invited students to reflect upon the element of the assigned homework that they found most interesting. Students generated a short (350 words) response. Students brought two copies of the response to class. The first copy was turned in, and the second copy was used for small, informal discussions of the material as the class started.

These assignments encouraged students to come to class prepared, but, as I graded these daily writing assignments, some of them seemed rather superficial. I wondered if the open-ended nature of the assignment contributed to this seeming superficiality. With the help of some ideas from the Teagle-funded Collaborative Humanities Redesign Project team, I decided I would do two things. The first thing was to encourage social learning by putting students into study groups. The second change was to restructure the daily writing assignment. In order to deliberately encourage social learning, I dedicated a few minutes of the first day of class to putting students into study groups. Each study group had three students. Each student in

the study group would have a numerical designation: one student designated as number one, another as number two, and the third as number three. I then changed the daily writing assignment. Instead of having each individual student generate a very open-ended response to “The Coolest Thing I Learned,” the revised assignment required students to generate a “Study Group Contribution.” Each “Study Group Contribution” was the same length as the previous “The Coolest Thing I Learned” assignment, but the difference was that each student in the study group had to respond to a specific prompt as their contribution to the study group’s learning.

An example of the revised assignment is the one I give for John Kennedy Toole’s novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*. For the new assignment, one student writes about how Toole characterizes the novel’s main character, Ignatius, in addition to writing about Ignatius’ worldview. A second student has to respond to Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* and its role in the novel. A third student discusses what the novel says about African-Americans and racism in New Orleans at the time. These specific prompts require that the three members of the study group look carefully at the novel and assemble insights that can be shared with the group. The hypothesis was that this would improve the writing assignments by providing greater focus. This would also encourage study groups, since the class would start with a discussion among study group members about each person’s contribution. The third element of this redesign was that then I structured the subsequent class discussion around those three prompts. The prompts are specific enough to generate a focused discussion while still requiring textual analysis skills. The prompts are also well suited to subsequent class discussion because they not only require students to synthesize many elements of the assignment, but they also allow us to discuss connections between the assigned work and other works examined in the class.

Implementation

In order to determine the effectiveness of this change, specifically the change in the redesigned daily writing assignment, I have compared the earlier “The Coolest Thing I Learned” papers with the subsequent “Study Group Contributions.” I examined the quality of the insights that these papers generated. I had several questions that an analysis of this redesign might answer: would the open-ended papers generate a broad range of insightful responses or would they yield papers that are vague and superficial? Would the revised assignments, the Study Group Contributions, have the sort of focus that would make them more substantial and insightful compared to the earlier assignments, or would they seem too limited and even mechanical or formulaic? Would the Study Group Contributions give the impression that students are just trying to answer the question without really delving into the assignment with depth or insight? My focus in comparing the assignments to measure their effectiveness was to see how well students could marshal clear textual evidence to build and support a compelling argument or to support worthwhile insights about the work of art.

In November 2015, I submitted a protocol to Elon’s IRB to get approval to do this research. I provided the consent form that I would send to students as well as the parameters and the objectives of the research. In December 2015 I was notified that my project had been approved. Each student was subsequently contacted and was given the opportunity to participate or not. An evaluation rubric was developed to examine the daily writing assignments. This rubric includes three evaluation levels. Papers ranked as “high” use clear textual evidence to build and support a compelling argument. In addition, “high” daily writing assignments demonstrate interesting and thoughtful writing. Assignments judged as “moderate” include some textual evidence to form an argument or provide insight, but the argument and/or the evidence is weaker than papers ranked as “high.” “Low” papers have little or no textual evidence and/or fail to make an argument.

Student Work

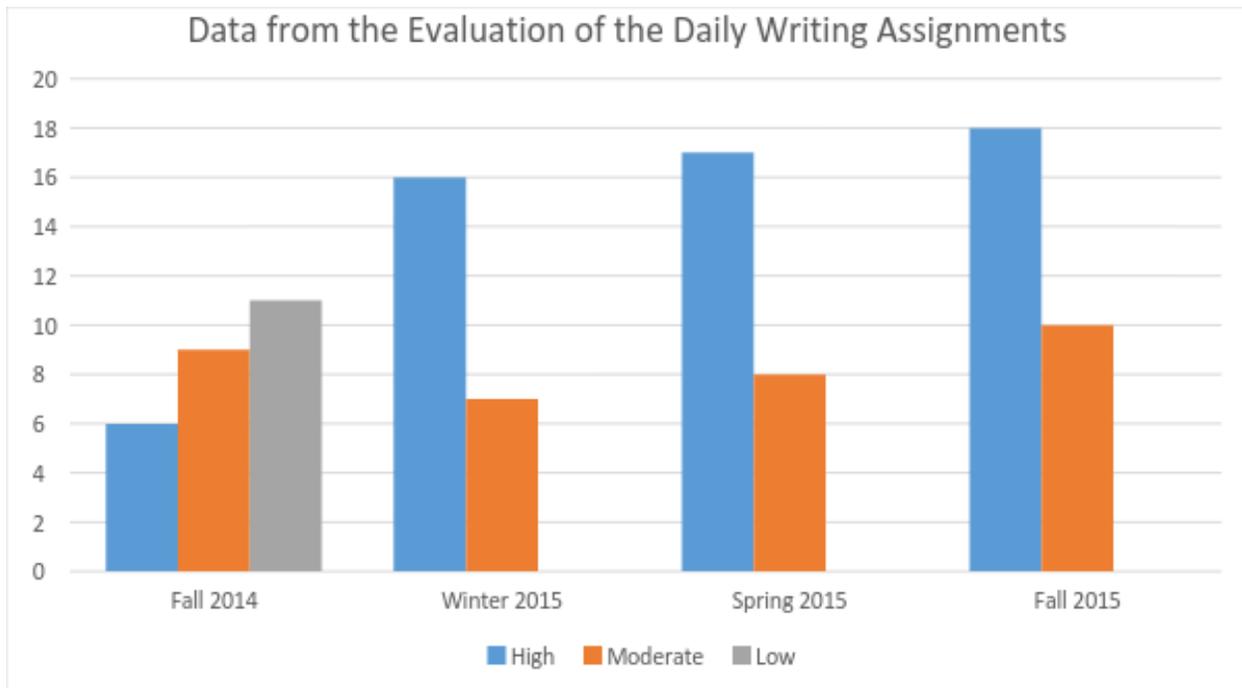
The assignments were examined using the rubric, and the results of that examination are in the below table. The papers from fall 2014 are the “The Coolest Thing I Learned” assignments, while the three subsequent semesters are “Study Group Contribution” assignments. The fall, 2014 semester was the first semester I assigned a daily writing paper, so it is the only group of “The Coolest Thing I Learned” assignments that could be compared.

Data from the evaluation of the daily writing assignments

	Fall 2014	Winter 2015	Spring 2015	Fall 2015
High	6	16	17	18
Moderate	9	7	8	10
Low	11	0	0	0

Percentage of papers for each level for the daily writing assignments

	Fall 2014	Winter 2015	Spring 2015	Fall 2015
High	23%	70%	68%	64%
Moderate	35%	30%	32%	36%
Low	42%	0%	0%	0%



Reflections

As these results demonstrate, students produced writing with much more textual evidence and a stronger argument with the revised Study Group Contributions than the earlier “The Coolest Thing I Learned” assignments. This confirms that the focused prompt led to writing with stronger evidence and better arguments. It is interesting to note that there were no daily writing assignments assessed as “low” for the Study Group Contributions. Part of what might also account for this improvement is that students knew that they were going to have to share their contributions. Students knew that their group was relying upon their input. The collaborative nature may have encouraged everyone to at least produce “moderate” contributions to the study group.

Of the earlier, “The Coolest Thing I Learned” papers, the best ones use evidence and tended to link a discussion of the assignment with something of interest to the student. Weaker papers featured personal, subjective responses, while the weakest ones spoke almost exclusively about the student’s response to reading the novel with little meaningful exploration of the book itself. The best Study Group Contributions provided a thorough response to the prompt, ample textual evidence, and a solid, interesting argument. Even the moderate papers provide a stronger exploration of the book than the correspondingly moderate “The Coolest Thing I Learned” papers. This revision may be particularly useful for first-year students, students who may be less comfortable or experienced engaging the assigned work and responding in an analytic instead of an almost exclusively subjective manner.

Where the data offers clear evidence of the effectiveness of this revision in generating student work with stronger textual evidence and better arguments, the course redesign includes two other elements that do not seem to lend themselves to a similar data analysis. These elements are encouraging social learning via study groups and clarifying the structure of daily class discussions. With respect to these goals, I offered extra credit to students who prepared for their exams by studying with study groups. The extra credit was a modest 2% bump in the exam score, and I implemented this with the change in the writing assignment in the winter of 2015. Over the subsequent semesters I have consistently had between 50% and 65% of students prepare for exams with study groups. While students have taken this option more often than not and while those who do seem both excited and happy with it as well as report a positive experience, I have neither the data nor the means to measure exactly how effective study group preparation has been relative to individual preparation. My impression from their enthusiasm for it and their positive experiences with it seem to indicate that it is effective.

In addition to the being used to encourage study groups, the nature of the Study Group Contribution prompts made them excellent points-of-departure for the subsequent class discussion. In fact, with these assignments in place, I structure the subsequent class discussions around those prompts. We spend about one third of the class, to use the example from the class on *A Confederacy of Dunces*, discussing Ignatius, his character and characterization, his worldview, and his relationships with key characters. We then spend another third of the class discussing *The Consolation of Philosophy* and how that book structures both Ignatius’ thinking and the novel itself. The final third of the class is spent examining the role of race in the novel. As students had examined these issues before coming to class, they are ready for a lively

discussion about these topics. My experience is that these prompts and the format encourages students to study in groups. They also provide a clear structure for class. Lacking any data to substantiate how well this revision clarified daily discussion structure, all I can offer are my impressions, but it does seem that the class discussions are structured in a way that they could easily understand and anticipate. My impression is that students also come much better prepared for those discussions because they have addressed a specific prompt. My impression is that our class discussion focused more on the text, on important issues, and on evidence and arguments related to the assignment rather than subjective responses to the reading. In these respects the course redesign produced better initial conversations about the assignment, better class discussions of the text, and more robust social learning.