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Preface and Acknowledgements

The Fall 2018 edition of the *M-PBEA Journal* brings together the current trends and best practices of our business education classroom. From teaching professionalism to improving the learning experience, the journal takes us through various components of today's learners and educators. This edition continues to expand the walls of our classrooms to include the world.

As editor of the 2018 edition, I would like to thank all individuals who submitted manuscripts for consideration in the journal. The time and effort spent researching and composing articles shows a true commitment to the education profession and to the professional growth of fellow educators.

Sincere appreciation and gratitude are extended to all those who played a role in the publication of the journal. The expertise that each shared in reviewing, proofreading, and general support was invaluable. An additional thank you to the members of the Review Board of Peer Evaluations who donated time from their busy schedules to review manuscripts and offer their expertise and advice to our authors.

If you are interested in participating in the next *M-PBEA Journal*, the call for papers will be posted on the Mountain-Plains Business Education Association's website, www.mpbea.org. Potential reviewers may contact the *M-PBEA Journal* Editor directly.

It does not matter how long you have been teaching. It is always a good idea to explore new ideas and try innovative approaches to teaching business subjects. We must not forget that we continue to be students ourselves. The journal authors provide insights that allow us to grow personally and professionally.

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Using the DATA-DATA Action Research Model to Explore Ethics in the Introductory Business Classroom

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The AACSB requires that business educators include discussions of business ethics in their classes. Various approaches are utilized to incorporate ethics into our classrooms. This article presents the use of the DATA-DATA approach to action research as a method of organizing a discussion of business ethics in the modern introductory business classroom. The DATA-DATA model is discussed and an example of an ethics discussion using this method is presented.

Introduction

As business educators, we often challenge ourselves to bring current "real world" ethical issues into our classrooms. Over the years, these topics have included consumer protection cases, such as lead paint used on children's toys and more recently the VW diesel emissions scandal to controversies involving ethical violations in the accounting profession. In light of current events surrounding movements such as #METOO and Black Lives Matter, students have also demanded more coverage of current ethical topics in their classes.

To find interesting ethical topics one only has to look at current headline news, talk to colleagues, see the textbook, and ask students about issues that involve their lives. These resources provide ample fodder for discussions of current ethics related cases. Typically, the textbooks do a solid job of describing business ethics generally, giving breakdowns of legal concepts and providing case examples. However, something was missing when students were challenged to apply these concepts on tests and in-class exercises. In addressing this lapse, colleagues were consulted. Thankfully, one of them suggested that the "action research" approach be considered to address this problem. Specifically, my colleague suggested the use of the DATA-DATA approach to action research devised by John Peters at the University of Tennessee (this acronym represents an eight-phase of action and reflection, specifically, Describe, Analyze, Theorize, Act, and Design, Analyze, Theorize and Act) (Peters, 2009).

This article provides a description of the DATA-DATA approach and how it can be put to use to facilitate, improve and organize a discussion of business ethics. Please note that the DATA-DATA method can easily fit within all business disciplines and could also easily apply to the coverage of a myriad of other business topics. In researching the DATA-DATA method, it was found that this approach to action research to be straight forward, intuitive and ultimately of great value in helping to meet the challenges of today's business classroom.

Business Ethics in Today's Classroom

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the major accrediting body of our nation's colleges and schools of business, requires coverage of the "… ethical environment in which businesses operate" (Bird & Hiller, 2016, n.p.). In response, those who teach business classes attempt to incorporate this coverage into our classrooms. Increasingly, business schools have even required a specific class in business ethics as a core course for all business majors. Many of us who teach in these areas acknowledge that a discussion of ethics is crucial to a well-rounded business education. This need is highlighted when examined in the context of the serious ethical failures that permeate our business culture. We need only examine recent headlines and lead stories from the nation's major media outlets to take note of these failures. For example, while preparing this paper for final submission, current news headlines indicated the fact that a tape has recently been leaked to the press covering a "secret" meeting between NFL owners and players. This meeting took place last fall in New York City to discuss strategies for dealing with the fallout of President Trump's comments about players kneeling during the national anthem (Belson & Leibovich, 2016, n.p.). Reading just a few excerpts from the taped meeting brought to mind a semester's worth of business ethics material that could be discussed. Today's business student is bombarded with these sorts of stories, and tomorrow's business leaders and professionals must be prepared to deal with these ethical dilemmas.

Once again, while our textbooks tend to provide ample material covering business ethics, organizing this material for presentation to the students remains the task of the instructor. In our classrooms, the best ethics discussions involve morally challenging and emotional topics (Comer & Schwartz, 2015). Like any good classroom exercise, the most impactful ethics discussions and assignments must be well organized and carefully structured (Rehman, 2017). Unlike other classroom exercises however, college-level ethics coverage requires an utterly objective position by the instructor (Rehman, 2017). Emotionally and morally challenging topics inspire passionate responses. Organizing an exercise around such topics especially requires planning to avoid situations where participants simply talk past each other and discussions devolve into shouting matches.

It is here, in organizing exercises on the sensitive topic of business ethics, that the DATA-DATA method of action research proves most valuable. If an educator teaching a business class seeks a method of emphasizing and incorporating an exercise or discussion covering ethics into their classes, this article examines one approach toward achieving this goal.

What is the Data-Data Approach to Action Research?

As is stated in the Call for Papers for this edition of the M-PBEA Journal, "Action Research is a broad research technique used to evaluate an existing practice to improve a process" (www.mpbea.org). In his article, *Data-Data: A Model for Practitioner-Researchers,* John Peters of the University of Tennessee, expands this description as follows:

> Action research is a systematic and critical study of one or more aspects of their work by practitioners, their aim being to make changes in their work based on the results of their inquiry. Action research focuses on the practitioner-researcher's own theory of practice, against the background of how his or her practice is situated, organized, and carried out. Individuals, groups, or organizations may undertake action research, and benefits may accrue to the researcher(s) or their research may be conducted in order to benefit others (Peters 2009, p. 149).

In order to conduct his action research, Peters developed the DATA-DATA model discussed earlier in the paper. Peters further explains that the focus of DATA1 is on what a researcher might do to reflect on his or her current practices and DATA2 focuses on what a researcher might do to formally and

systematically inquire into some aspect of practice. DATA1 should lead to achieving clarification and improved understanding of the practices most closely associated with the motivation for acting in the first place. DATA2 leads the researcher to identifying research question(s) and provides the details of a formal inquiry into the practice guided by practical theory (Peters, 2009, p. 152).

According to Peters, academics have used this DATA-DATA model to assist in planning research in varied disciplines (Peters, 2009, p. 150). Additionally, researchers in higher education, business and community development have used this method to conduct action research projects (Peters, 2009, p. 151).

Discussion

What follows is a three step approach to introducing an ethics project into the typical introductory business class. This approach uses DATA-DATA as a tool to structure the exercise in a way that is logical and impactful for students while attempting to avoid disorganized arguments that often result in feelings of anxiety and discord.

Step one: First present a discussion of ethics generally. Most textbooks at the introductory level include a section on business ethics. The ethics chapters in these books tend to provide ample examples of “unethical” business conduct. Some books include coverage of ethical scandals such as Enron, Charles Ponzi and Bernard Madoff. Encourage students to come to class with a current article covering a business ethics problem that they wish to address. If students struggle with finding such material, direct them to the Wall Street Journal Weekly Review (www.wsj.com). This site consolidates major stories involving ethical issues arising in current business contexts.

The instructor should emphasize that while coverage in the typical textbook tends to place the highest importance on ethics as a tool to avoid trouble (Doh & Tashman, 2014) and discern “…what is right and wrong behavior in the business world” (Clarkson, Miller & Cross, 2015, p. 95) a true understanding of ethics involves much more. Ethics and ethical behavior are global and are entwined in our social, economic and environmental conditions (Wright & Bennett, 2011 from our other paper on sustainability). Discussions of ethics can include concepts such as the “triple bottom line” (Slaper & Hall, 2011), “common good” (Ryan, 2018) and “moral courage” (Comer & Schwartz, 2017).

Step two: Next, this process should include teaching students about action research and how to utilize the DATA-DATA approach as a lens through which to explore the ethical dilemma presented in their article. As discussed above, the DATA-DATA method consists of eight cyclic phases of action and reflection. As Peters explains, DATA-DATA “…begins with a problem…” (Peters, 2009, p. 151). In most introductory business classes, the steps of DATA-DATA can be modified and used as the structure for responding to the ethical problem that students have identified. Students then move forward with the DATA-DATA process.

In the first stage of DATA-DATA (DATA1) students begin by describing the problem. This step includes identification of the details of the situation or the context in which it arises. To the extent possible, the situation is not judged at this stage, but simply clarified. The question, explains Peters, is not to ask *Why?* the problem exists but rather *What?* the problem is (Peters, 2009, p. 153).

Next, comes the analyze portion of DATA1. At this step in the process, the question moves from *What?* to *Why?*. As the *Why?* of the problem is explored, students can add their assumptions about the problem and explore reasons for its existence. In analyzing the problem, students more fully explore their concerns, feelings and interests related to the issue.

Students then move on to theorize about the problem. At this point, students examine approaches to make a change to the situation at hand. Peters explains that at this step, questions are both *What?* and *Why?*. For example, "What can be done to correct this problem?" and "Why this approach to a resolution and not others" (Peters, 2009, p. 154).

Action marks the last step, at this time students return to *What?* Action requires a detailed plan and steps to follow to apply the solutions developed during the theorize part of the exercise. Peters explains that at this point students will identify tasks to be completed, a schedule to be followed and who will do what and when they will do it (Peters, 2009, p. 154).

For many instructors, the DATA1 exercise described above will complete their coverage of ethics as a topic and the specific ethics project. However, for those who wish to go farther into their action research project with ethics, the next steps involve DATA2. This phase involves options such as abandon the plan, postpone the plan, implement the plan or conduct further study of the plan (Peters, 2009, p. 155). DATA2, begins with design. With designing the plan, the student-researcher can test the solution they devised as part of DATA1. Next, analysis takes place of the data related to the plan. At the theorize stage of DATA2 the student interprets their findings and asks, "What do the findings mean in terms of my solution or theory" (Peters, 2009, p. 155). Action again concludes the process as the student-researcher takes what they have learned and revises their actual practices or makes recommendations for revisions of others' practices (Peters, 2009, p. 156).

Step three: The final step in the process of using DATA-DATA action research in discussions and projects involving ethics calls for reflection and self-examination focusing on what the students experienced during the project. At this stage, students should "decompress" and explore how the DATA-DATA experience might inform future decision making, not just as it concerns ethics but any future business decision.

Anecdotally, we have found that students deeply appreciate having a tool they can use to add some structure and formality to organizing their thoughts, actions and decisions. Today's world generates a lot of anxiety for young people. Bringing some sense of order and predictability helps to quell the anxiety (University Wire, 2018, n.p.).

Using the DATA-DATA approach in a specific classroom discussion

Goal: Collecting data in the classroom to improve the teaching of ethics

Ethics Topic: Since January 20 to May 18, 2018, there have been 23 school shootings in the United States, over one per week (CNN, May 25, 2018). Congress has been unable to pass legislation to improve this situation. Dick's Sporting Goods announced on February 28, 2018, that their stores will no longer sell AR-15s, no longer sell firearms to anyone under 21 years of age, no longer sell high capacity magazines or bump stocks, and asked congress to pass gun control (Alloutdoors). While Dick's supports the second amendment (the right to bear arms), Dick's is calling on congress to do something about school violence.

Ethics Research Topic: School violence

Application of the DATA-DATA method

(the following is an example of how this method can be used for a research topic)

DATA 1 – Reflecting on what a researcher (the student) might do to reflect on his or her current practices

Describe – Gather information (at least ten articles) about school shootings and business ethical conduct. Paraphrase each article. Keep an "open mind" about the problem. Do not jump to any conclusions. Go where the data leads you. Do you need additional articles?

At the describe part of DATA-1, the idea is to be very open to simply describing the situation. What are the facts, what are the events, what are we talking about? This description – which may even be non-narrative – forms the bases or the "data" for the next stage of analysis. The goal here is to gather as much information and descriptive detail as possible for further analysis. For instance, students might create a folder of articles from newspapers, scholarly sources, advocacy sources, and policy sources. They could then summarize these articles in a paragraph to pull out the main takeaways. This "pile" of data would then be the basis for the next stage of analysis. In doing this work, they should as much as possible withhold judgement on what the problem is (or what might be done about it) and focus on collecting data.

Analyze – Step One - Analyze your own preconceived ideas about this situation. Consider a "bracketing interview," where two students interview each other about preconceived ideas on school shootings and business ethics. Step Two - Take the data you have collected and consider your preconceived notions / thoughts about school shootings and business ethical conduct. Formulate a problem statement that is driven by the data and not your preconceived ideas. What is this data telling you about the actual central research topic?

Theorize – Develop a solution to the problem statement. Ask "why" do you think this solution will work (look into root-cause analysis). Develop at least three "why" questions. This is the stage where students would start to think about how to solve the problem. In proposing a solution, the students really need to ask themselves a series of "whys". So for instance:

Problem statement: "There are too many mass shootings at schools"
Propose solution: "A ban on all guns from school property"
Why questions:

- "Why would banning all guns from school property prevent mass shootings?"
- "Because people won't bring guns onto school property, and therefore there would be no mass shootings."
- "Why would a ban prevent people from bringing guns onto school property?"
- "Because it is the law and there would be punishments for violating the ban."
- "Why would breaking the law and potentially incurring punishments deter a potential school shooter?"

Here is where the student needs to be challenged to think through the actual step by step process of how their proposed solution would lead to the looked-for result.

Act – Consider action steps as possible solutions. Consider what various schools have done to reduce school violence. Consider what businesses have done to reduce school violence.

The central idea here is to create an action plan: "What specific steps would have to happen to apply my practical theory in this situation?" This means identify tasks to be completed, a schedule to be followed,

and who would do what and when they would do it. Thinking through the detailed action plan may also lead to revisions to the initial theory.

DATA 2 – The researcher (the student) focuses on what might be done to formally and systematically inquire into some aspect of practice.

Design – Reflect on the action steps above and describe what schools and businesses have previously done to reduce school violence. Evaluate if these actions have been effective / what was the outcome? Interview school administrators, policy makers, and business leaders for actions previously attempted.

This is basically the phase where a researcher would design a specific research project to test specific hypothesized relationships from the theory above. In this case, though, it would make sense that students either (1) did research places that have already implemented their proposed idea and see what the results were or (2) if nobody has done what the student is proposing, the student might interview knowledgeable individuals (administrators, business owners, policy makers, etc.) on what those individuals think would be the likely outcomes.

Analyze – Analyze the outcome of these previous actions.

Did the results from places that have already implemented the proposed recommendations confirm or disconfirm the predictions of the theory? Alternatively, did the feedback from knowledgeable individuals confirm/disconfirm the predictions of the theory?

Theorize – What did the outcomes tell us about our original solution (theory) to the problem statement? How might we revise our solution (theory) based on this new information to better achieved desired results.

Act - What revisions do we want to make to our original solution? Why do we want to make these changes? How might we revise our initial detailed action plan to (from the Act Phase in DATA-1) to better specify how we would put our new solution (theory) into practice. What information would we look for to get a sense of whether this revised solution (theory) is working? I.e., how might we test our revised solution (theory)?

Conclusion

Look around, listen, and think about the ethical challenges of our modern times. Now place yourself in the shoes of an 18, 19 or 20 year old student. A literal flood of information streams at them, some of it good, much of it bad. Some of it true, much of it embellished, slanted to meet the needs of some group or individual or simply false. Students crave structure in their lives, in their classes and in their worlds. They need to be equipped with tools to help them deal with these challenging situations and with these challenging times. The DATA-DATA approach to action research is just such a tool.

As an instructor, this approach to organizing ethics exercises can provide some comfort. This approach assists in maintaining objectivity. By implementing this method, one can avoid situations that can leave the classroom spinning out of control and discussions that lose their meaning as we argue instead of debate topics. In a future article, we plan to more fully report back on how students have responded to this approach and to provide more specific examples of exercises that have been successful and why.

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Mandala Coloring and Perceptions of Stress Reduction in Management Students

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This article presents the results of action research involving the use of a mandala coloring activity in management courses and the perceptions of students (n = 93) about the activity and its effect on their stress levels. The majority of the students reported that their stress levels were lowered after completing the mandala coloring activity. Based upon feedback from students, the activity will continue to be used in management courses along with other activities.

Introduction

The activity of coloring drawings experienced a resurgence in 2015. In fact, selling coloring books helped to boost the bottom line of businesses such as Barnes & Noble, which sold several coloring books, particularly those marketed to adults (Townsend, 2017). Many of those coloring books were advertised as means of reducing stress, promoting calm, and increasing mindfulness. In addition to coloring books, items such as greeting cards and wrapping paper were manufactured for creative coloring expression. This coloring activity trend was embraced by diverse people from all age groups. Today many progressive public and academic libraries host coloring hours for children and adults on a regular basis. Further, college and university student service centers provide coloring activities to students during stressful times of the semester such as prior to midterm exams and final exams (A. Young, personal communication, April 27, 2018).

While coloring activities are purported to reduce stress levels of students, are these assertions substantiated by management students who experience a mandala coloring activity?

A mandala is a drawing that has geometric patterns surrounded by a circle. In fact, mandala is the Sanskrit word for "circle" (Cunningham, 2010). A mandala consists of geometric patterns radiating from a central point within a circle that is often times embedded into a square and symbolically and metaphysically represents the universe. Mandalas have been used since ancient times to focus the attention of practitioners of such spiritual traditions as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity ("Mandala," 2018).

Jung reported that making mandala forms "was used by many cultures in rituals to represent wholeness and healing" (Cunningham, 2010, p. 18). Jung reported that the urge to create mandalas occurs during times of intense personal growth while the psyche is rebalancing, resulting in a personality that is better integrated ("Mandala," 2018). Fincher (2010) asserted that mandala creation stabilizes, integrates, and reorders inner life.

In addition to being readily available in published book and consumable workbook formats, mandalas can be easily constructed with such basic tools as compasses, protractors, and rulers. Examples

of mandalas can be found by accessing the mandala gallery on Wikipedia (Mandala, 2018). For those who prefer the digital format, the Color Therapy app can be used to color various pages, including pages depicting mandalas.

Review of the Literature

Much of the research about coloring mandalas has been conducted by art and art therapy practitioners. Carsley, Heath, and Fajnarova (2015) found that test anxiety was reduced in children after finishing a coloring activity. Interestingly, free form abstract shapes reduced test anxiety in boys, while mandala shapes reduced test anxiety levels in girls. In 2005 Curry and Kasser conducted a seminal study about the effectiveness of three different art activities in anxiety reduction. Students at the undergraduate level were assigned randomly to one of three groups. One group colored on blank sheets of paper, a second group colored mandalas, and a third group colored plaid forms. The unstructured coloring activity group experienced less of a reduction in stress levels than did the other two groups that colored provided forms. Both the mandala coloring group and the plaid form coloring group experienced nearly the same levels of anxiety reduction. A replication study conducted by Van De Vennet and Serice (2012) confirmed the findings of the original study and recommended that coloring mandalas be used to reduce anxiety.

Allen (2011) reported that mandala creation rather than engaging in a neutral drawing activity was helpful in alleviating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) severity in college students. In addition to alleviating symptoms representative of PTSD, the student subjects experienced decreased symptoms of depression and trait anxiety. Allen posited that "drawing may in and of itself be therapeutic and aid in the reduction of trauma associated symptoms" (p. ii). Students who colored self-created free form designs demonstrated a higher level of perseverance and more substantial reduction in anxiety than students who colored pre-drawn forms according to Eaton and Tieber (2017).

Research by Drake, Searight, and Olson-Pupek (2014) reported that negative mood states in university students decreased in all three of the groups involved in the study using (a) pre-drawn mandalas, (b) free form coloring blank pages, and (c) a pre-drawn plaid form. No statistically significant differences were reported among the three activities. Further, those participants using the pre-drawn plaid form demonstrated significant reductions in depression ($p > .03$) and tension ($p > .05$).

Research by Abbott, Shanahan, and Neufeld (2013) about the role of artistic tasks versus non-artistic tasks in stress reduction revealed that both types of tasks decreased stress levels of students; however, participation in artistic activities resulted in greater stress reduction than participation in non-artistic activities. Babouchinka and Robbins (2015) studied the relationship of drawn shape (square or circle) on mood regulation and learned that adults who colored circular shapes experienced a greater level of negative mood reduction than those adults who colored square shapes.

The Art Therapy Association reported the benefits of coloring mandalas:

> Coloring books provide a controlled, contained use of art for self-soothing purposes, and their success-oriented nature is conducive to fulfillment of the need for instant gratification. They can be completed by anyone with minimal risk. Preprinted designs allow for structure that facilitates safety and minimizes emotional risk which may explain their appeal to broader audiences. For instance, mandalas are often used to promote centering and stress reduction (Carolan & Betts, 2015, n.p.).

Salazar (2018) explored the use of coloring mandalas and free doodling on communication anxiety in students enrolled in communication courses with a focus on business communication and oral

communication. The study findings suggested that the act of mandala coloring reduced communication anxiety in public speaking, meeting, and group situations. Further, group anxiety decreased to a greater extent after mandala coloring than when engaging in free doodling activities.

Zimmerman (2017) reported that the level of anxiety experienced by college students is high, with overwhelming levels of anxiety reported by almost two-thirds of the survey respondents. What, then, is the effect of a mandala coloring activity upon the perceived stress levels of university level students enrolled in management courses?

A review of the business literature revealed few pertinent reported studies about mandala coloring activities and stress. Thus, this exploratory action research was undertaken to fill part of the gap in the business education literature.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research was to investigate the perception of management students about the effect of a coloring mandala activity on their level of stress. Based upon the purpose of the study, the following research questions were posed:

1. Did the management students have childhood experience with coloring activities?
2. If management students possessed childhood coloring activity experience, how enjoyable was that experience?
3. What was the perceived effect of the mandala coloring activity on management student stress levels?
4. How enjoyable was the mandala coloring activity experience for management students?
5. What recommendation would management students make for continuing the activity in future academic courses?

Methods of Research

The mandala activity was scheduled near the end of the course—a time during which students typically experience increased stress levels. Management students were introduced to the history of mandalas, how mandalas are constructed, and how they are used. Students were asked to select a page with a pre-drawn mandala for the coloring activity and encouraged to select a mandala image that resonated with them. Coloring media were made available to students including various hues of colored pencils, markers, and crayons. A total of 30 minutes was allotted for completion of the activity. At the conclusion of the activity, a short survey about the coloring mandala experience was distributed to students who were encouraged to complete the questionnaire.

A total of 93 students enrolled in four sections of three related management skills courses responded to the survey. The survey consisted of seven items. Five items addressed previous coloring experience, the enjoyment of that experience, the effect of the mandala coloring activity on perceived stress level, the enjoyment of the mandala coloring activity, and suggestions for future use of the activity. Two items were open-ended qualitative responses about the activity. The survey was piloted in a course, and minor changes in wording were made to two survey items to increase clarity.

Findings

Quantitative data findings and qualitative data findings are presented in the following sections.

Quantitative data. The first question asked students whether they had colored as a child. Almost all of the respondents, 91 of 93 students or 97.8%, indicated that they had colored drawings as a child. Of those who had childhood coloring experience, 76 students or 83.5% had enjoyed coloring very much, while 15 students or 16.5% had enjoyed coloring somewhat.

Students were asked to report their perception of the impact of the mandala coloring activity on their stress levels. Most students, 79 of 93 students or 84.8%, reported a lower stress level, 4 students or 4.4% reported no change in their stress level, and 10 students or 10.8% reported that they did not know the effect of the activity on their stress level.

When asked to indicate their level of enjoyment of the coloring activity, 82 students or 88.1% enjoyed the activity very much, 9 students or 9.7% reported they enjoyed the activity somewhat, 1 student or 1.1% reported not enjoying the activity, and one student or 1.1% did not respond to the item.

A total of 90 students or 96.7% strongly recommended that the mandala coloring activity be continued in future course sections. Two students or 2.2% were neutral about continuing the activity, and one student or 1.1% reported that the activity was anxiety provoking.

Qualitative data. Students were asked to comment about the usefulness of the mandala coloring activity. Representative responses included, "I liked it because I feel that my life is always running really fast, and it just seemed like a necessary time to relax for a few minutes." Echoing this comment, another student wrote, "I forgot how coloring can help you forget about all your worries." Yet another student commented, "Coloring helped me clear my mind and relax. It especially helped me since I had a midterm right after [this] class."

One student made this comment to the instructor: "Professor, did you notice that not one student looked at a cell phone during this activity?" In addition, several students indicated that they had enjoyed the activity and had purchased coloring books to help them focus and relax.

Almost all of the students had colored drawings as a child, an activity that most students enjoyed. Overall, the findings of this study reveal that most students found completing a mandala coloring activity to be relaxing and believed that their stress levels were reduced after 30 minutes of focused coloring. This finding was consistent among the study participants from three management skill courses that experienced the described coloring activity, suggesting the universality of stress reduction after mandala coloring. Students rated the activity as enjoyable with over 95% of the student respondents reporting they enjoyed the mandala coloring activity very much or somewhat. More than 95% of the student participants recommended that the mandala coloring activity be continued in future semesters.

Implications

This mandala coloring activity has been tested in three management courses: (a) high performance management, a management skills course that includes listening, providing feedback, resolving conflict, and negotiating), (b) business communication, and a (c) mindfulness course. Responses of students enrolled in the various courses were quite consistent, with students recommending that the activity be continued. A few students suggested lengthening the time to complete the mandala coloring activity and allowing two students to work on coloring the same mandala.

How might the activity of coloring mandalas be used by business instructors? Business instructors might consider implementing coloring mandalas and similar activities before high-stakes course events such as delivering presentations and participating in panel discussions. Moreover, coloring mandalas may also be incorporated into courses before students take midterm and final exams.

For this investigation, students colored different mandalas. In future semesters, providing the same mandala form to all students would be an interesting variation of this activity and allow direct comparison of results. Does the type of mandala form affect the stress level? For example, does choosing a mandala form that resonates with an individual provide more stress reduction? Does selecting a form that has little or no appeal to the person coloring the mandala have any effect on perceived stress level?

Further, anxiety levels could be measured formally before and after the coloring activity rather than relying solely on student self-reports of their stress levels to more precisely measure actual changes in anxiety levels resulting from the coloring activity. Another variation that could be explored would involve exploring whether the choice of coloring medium (crayons, colored markers, colored pencils, or digital coloring through an app such as Color Therapy) has an effect on stress levels. Are there any significant differences in anxiety reduction resulting from using self-created mandalas as opposed to pre-drawn mandalas? In other words, this proposed study would attempt to measure the stress reducing benefits of artistic creation.

In summary, this pilot study could be expanded in several ways to (a) more accurately gauge student anxiety levels by using valid and reliable instruments to precisely measure anxiety and (b) broaden the types of coloring activities and coloring media used, (c) and compare the findings with validated stress reducing breathing practices such as the 4-7-8 breath (inhaling for four counts, holding the breath for seven counts, and exhaling for eight counts) and the 7-7-7 breath (inhaling, holding, and exhaling the breath for 7 counts each).

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Investigating Student Perceptions of the Role of Social Presence in Online Classes

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Online education is on the rise and this raises pedagogical issues regarding how to best structure online classes to achieve the course objectives and help students succeed. Training focused on online teaching often emphasizes the need for interaction with the content, other students, and the instructor. This replication study investigated the level of importance students place on social presence as it relates to their professor and fellow students in online classes and, based on those comparisons, breaks the data further into subgroups to determine differences based on gender or ethnicity. Implications for educators based on the findings are provided.

Introduction

Online education is on the rise. The "Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017" found that in Fall 2015, over six million students took at least one online course. In addition, it was reported that 29.7% of all higher education students took at least one course at a distance (i.e., online). That includes students enrolled exclusively online (14.3%) and those taking a combination of online and face-to-face classes (15.4%). With nearly 3 out of 10 students choosing to enroll in online classes, instructors are developing new online classes and transitioning traditionally face-to-face classes into online formats. This raises pedagogical issues regarding how to best structure online classes to achieve the course objectives and help students succeed. Training focused on online teaching often emphasizes the need for three types of interaction: student to content, student to student, and student to instructor.

Two of these interactions, student to student and student to instructor, are often classified as social presence in the class. To investigate social presence, it is important to first have a common definition of what the term social presence means. According to Dasgupta (2009) of George Washington University, definitions in research of social presence tend to fall on a continuum. He describes this continuum as ranging from one end where it is conceptualized as "whether someone is able to project him or herself as being 'real' in an online environment and whether others perceived this person as being there and being real" (p. 120) to the continuum's other end where, "researchers tend to go beyond whether someone is perceived as being 'present' – that is, simply 'there' or 'real' – but focus on whether there is an interpersonal emotional connection between communicators" (p. 120). The researchers for the current study provided participants with the following definition for social presence as a context for their answers to the survey questions:

> Social presence in the virtual learning environment is the measure of feeling that is experienced by the learners. In simple terms, the researchers in this study are trying to determine how important it is to you that you feel there is a presence, albeit virtual, in the online class from the instructor and your fellow students (as opposed to you doing the work independently without interaction from others).

Literature Review

Over the past decades, during the continuing increase of online education, universities have had to look at new ways of delivery to maintain and increase enrollments. Bawa (2016) states that online delivery systems have revolutionized educational technology by providing multitudes of students, many of whom would not otherwise be able to continue their education, relatively easy access to courses. Despite the benefits of online education accessibility, online classes continue to face serious retention issues. State funding is often based on the number of students who enroll, and in some cases, complete university courses. For this reason, headcount can be very important to university growth. Historically, online education has higher attrition rates in fully online programs compared with traditional on campus programs (Bawa, 2016).

Based on a study by Cobb (2009), "social presence remains a key influential component of the quality of the online learning experience from the student perspective" (p. 251). Increasing the quality of online learning, as well as increasing its efficiency, may be facilitated by increased social presence opportunities. Like the current study, Jennings, Sutherlin, and Counts (in press) surveyed students to determine how important they deemed it was to feel a social presence from the professor and from fellow students. Results indicated that more than 73% of students felt it important or very important to feel a social presence from the instructor in an online class.

The next area they looked at was the importance students placed on social presence from their fellow classmates. Much of the literature suggests that social presence with fellow classmates is just as important as instructor presence (Cameron, Morgan, Williams, & Kostelecky, 2009; Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, & Killion, 2009; Nyachae, 2011; Sadera, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009; Whiteside, 2015). Jennings, Sutherlin, and Counts (in press), however, found a much different level of importance from their study when it came to the social presence from fellow classmates. Only 36% felt it important/very important to feel a social presence from fellow classmates – which was less than half of the number that felt social presence from the instructor important/very important.

According to Richardson, Koehler, Besser, Caskurlu, Lim, and Mueller (2015), "Students value many actions, attributes, and behaviors of instructors and likely develop a perception of an instructor's presence from their observations of what has been traditionally considered either social or teaching presence" (p. 259). Chen and Jang (2010) suggest that course designers and instructors need to be cognizant of the student backgrounds and motivations for being involved in online learning. They stress that marginalized groups may need special consideration for self-determination needs to be met. In looking at course design, Bawa (2010) states that often, "the individual perceptions of the students and the teachers are dramatically different resulting in overall poorly designed courses that are confusing and dissatisfying for the learners" (p. 6). In a 2010 study (Nistor & Neubauer), it was noted that those dropping out of the class had significantly less participation throughout the course, in particular, with regard to communication with the instructor and response to assignments. They noted the need for feeling a sense of connectivity with classmates and instructors.

In a study by Gaytan (2015), students indicated that they felt the highest rated factor affecting retention was increased faculty instruction (in the form of video recorded lectures, PowerPoint presentation with video and audio, and other self-paced modules). The second highest was meaningful feedback given to students. Both of these highly rated factors can be correlated to social presence – feeling that there is a connection between the instructor and the online student. Feedback was examined by Hall and Jennings (2017) in relation to appropriate response times for online instructors. Both students and faculty were surveyed on their perceptions of appropriate feedback time in online classes. As with the Gaytan results, students often wanted more feedback than simply a grade on the assignment. Hall and Jennings reported the importance of having a clearly defined response time policy in the syllabus and

course materials resulting in their suggestion that, "Clearly communicated guidelines can help reduce the conflict inherent with differing views on appropriate response times" (p. 106).

When looking at the effects of social presence and community within an online environment there is also the question of whether there is a difference in the perceived importance of social presence based on the gender and ethnicity of the student. Rovai and Baker (2005) examined whether men and women differed in their sense of classroom community and perceived learning. Their study revealed the presence of gender related differences in participation and perceptions of learning in the online classroom. The results of their study showed that female students scored higher on both participation and perception of learning. Though they cautioned about generalizing to all students due to the limitation of one university included in the study, they did provide empirical support for the idea that "men and women communicate at different levels, perceive community differently, and have differing views of perceived learning in an online educational environment" (p. 42).

In looking at ethnicity, Boyette (2008) suggested that African-American students work better as part of a close geographical proximity cohort. In online education, this is not usually an option. However, this observation coincides with a study by Rovai and Ponton (2005) who concluded that online environments are not a strong supporter of the communal values and community preference of African-American students. Further, Merrills (2010) found that African-American students found online classes more challenging due to the lack of oral communication and expressed the desire to actually speak to their instructors offline.

Ashong and Commander (2012, p. 106) proposed that, "the opportunities for reflective thinking and the convenience afforded by asynchronous online learning environments and tools may be more appealing to White students than to African American students." They further suggested that, "African-American students have less positive views of the asynchronous aspect of online learning because they have a stronger preference for real-time collaboration and group work than White students" (Ashong & Commander, 2012, p. 106).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to replicate and extend a previous study (Jennings, Sutherlin, & Counts, in press) to investigate the level of importance students place on social presence as it relates to their professor and fellow students in online classes and, based on those comparisons, break the data further into subgroups to determine if any noticeable differences exist based on gender or ethnicity.

Procedure

In the spring 2018 semester, the researchers administered an online electronic survey via Qualtrics® to students enrolled in undergraduate online business classes at one university in the southwestern part of the United States.

Instrument

This study used a survey instrument designed by and used in a study by Jennings, Sutherlin, and Counts (in press). Demographic information on age, gender, ethnicity, educational classification, major, and number of online classes taken was gathered from respondents. A definition for social presence in context of its use in the study was included. Questions were designed to examine perceived importance of social presence from both the instructor and fellow classmates.

Participants/Demographics

Participation in this study was optional. All participants were provided and agreed to the informed consent to participate in this Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved research study. A total of 111 useable surveys were collected from six sections of classes. Of these participants, 37.8% (*n*=42) identified as male and 62.2% (*n*=69) identified as female. Participants indicated the number of online classes in which they had previously participated with the smallest group (1.5%) being those indicating this was their first online class and the largest group (45.9%) being those who have taken more than 12 online classes. The complete breakdown is as follows: First online class 1.5%; 1 – 3 online classes 10.2%; 4 – 8 online classes 25%; 9 – 12 online classes 17.3%; and more than 12 online classes 45.9%. The self-reported ethnicity of the group is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Ethnicity of Participants

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Black/African American	19	17.1%	17.1%
Hispanic/Latino	15	13.5%	30.6%
White/Caucasian	71	64.0%	94.6%
Mixed	6	5.4%	100%

The largest group in the sample, comprising 64%, was White/Caucasian. Ages were grouped into ranges with the lowest age being 18 to a group with the highest age of 64. A breakdown of the self-reported age groups can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Ages of Participants

Age Group	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
18 – 21 years	42	37.8%	37.8%
22 – 25 years	41	36.9%	74.7%
26 – 34 years	12	10.8%	85.5%
35 – 44 years	13	11.7%	97.2%
45 – 54 years	2	1.9%	99.1%
55 – 64 years	1	.9%	100%

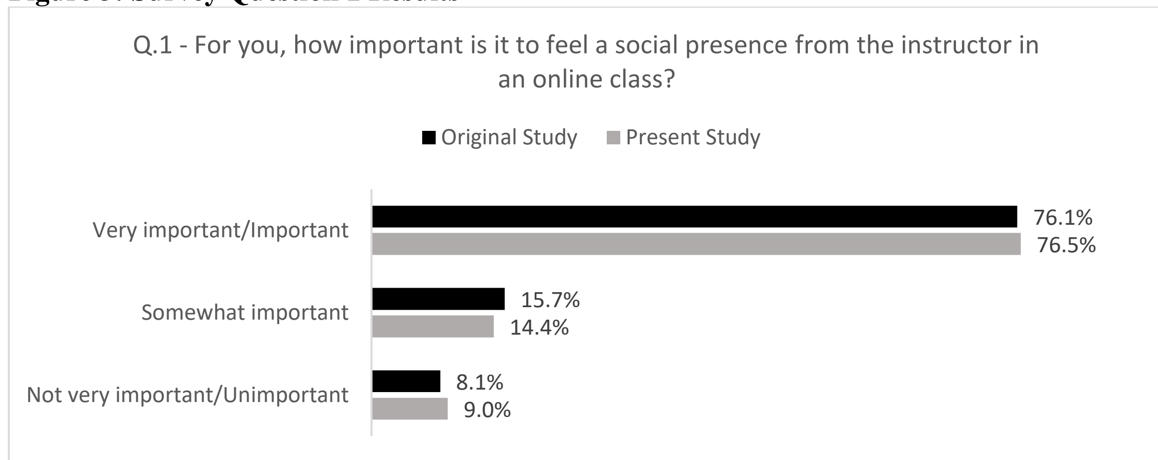
As seen in the table, nearly 75% of the students were 25 years of age or younger. This differs somewhat from the original study by Jennings, Sutherlin, and Counts (in press) which is replicated by this study in that their participants had less than 60% at 25 years or younger.

Findings

The survey answers for determining the students' perceptions of the importance of social presence from their instructor and from their fellow classmates were indicated by choosing from a five-point Likert scale ranging from Very Important to Unimportant. For purposes of comparison to the original study, the scale was collapsed to three points.

Social Presence of Instructor. The first question examined the social presence from their instructor. Shown below is the chart for Question 1. Included in this chart by permission from the authors are the percentages for the study being replicated.

Figure 3: Survey Question 1 Results



The original study reported nearly three quarters of students indicated it was Important or Very important to feel a social presence from the instructor. This is very close to the present study where 76.5% indicated Important or Very important. The other three categories were all within 1.3% of the previous study.

The researchers then broke down the responses by gender to examine the data for noticeable differences. Figure 4 shows the breakdown by gender to Question 1: For you, how important is it to feel a social presence from the instructor in an online class?

Figure 4: Question 1 by Gender Results

	Very important/ Important	Somewhat important	Not very important/ Unimportant
Males	73.8%	11.9%	14.3%
Females	78.2%	15.9%	5.9%

The responses showed Very Important/Important for males responding at 73.8% and for females 78.2%, a difference of 4.4%. However, males were more than twice as likely as females were (14.3% as compared to 5.9%) to rate the social presence of the instructor as Not very important/Unimportant.

The researchers also broke down the responses by ethnicity. The following table shows the breakdown of responses Very Important/Important by ethnicity. Interestingly, the Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino were very similar with 84.2% and 86.6% respectively. White/Caucasian responses were lower at 73.3% and Mixed was the lowest at 66.7%.

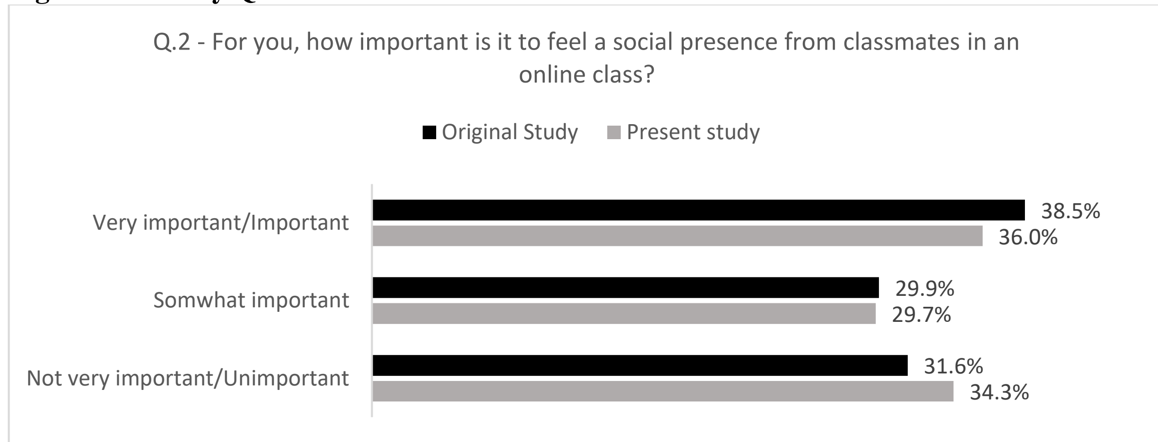
Figure 5: Question 1 by Ethnicity Results

Ethnicity	Very Important/Important
Black/African American	84.2%
Hispanic/Latino	86.6%
White/Caucasian	73.3%
Mixed	66.7%

Social Presence of Classmates. The survey answers for determining the students' perceptions of the importance of social presence from their fellow classmates were examined. Though there still appears to be some importance placed on social presence from classmates by a number of students, the number

that rated it Very important/Important was much lower than that of the importance of social presence from the instructor.

Figure 6: Survey Question 2 Results



All of the categories are close to the original study with the largest difference being in Not very important/Unimportant at a 2.7% difference.

The numbers were then again broken down by gender and ethnicity. Question 2 (For you, how important is it to feel a social presence from classmates in an online class?) results by gender are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Question 2 by Gender Results

	Very important/ Important	Somewhat important	Not very important/ Unimportant
Males	38.1%	23.8%	38.0%
Females	34.8%	33.3%	31.9%

Both males and females indicated a much lower level of importance placed on the social presence from fellow classmates as compared to social presence from the instructor. When it came to ethnicity, the following results emerged as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Question 2 by Ethnicity Results

Ethnicity	Very Important/Important
Black/African American	31.6%
Hispanic/Latino	53.3%
White/Caucasian	33.8%
Mixed	66.7%

It may be notable that the Hispanic/Latino (*n*=15) was 20 percentage points higher than White/Caucasian (*n*=71) and over 21 percentage points higher than Black/African American (*n*=19). Those reporting mixed ethnicity had the largest departure from the other categories, but the sample size for mixed is small (*n*=6). Interestingly, however, despite research studies that suggest African American students prefer group learning and cohorts, when asked about the importance of social presence from their classmates, the Black/African American group of students rating this Very Important or Important was only 31.6%.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study helps to validate the results of the previous study by Jennings, Sutherlin, and Counts (in press) with similar reporting. It expands on these results by further breaking down the data to examine the responses in terms of gender and ethnicity.

The literature review, as well as the results of the replicated and current study, confirm the importance of social presence of the instructor to the students. This social presence may be a key component in furthering class performance, satisfaction, and completion for online courses and programs. Though the review of literature seems to place equal importance on social presence of both instructors and fellow classmates, the research in neither study confirmed that aspect. Though there were some students who felt the social presence of fellow classmates important, it was not nearly as important as the social presence of the instructor.

Recommendations for online instructors include being aware of the importance of projecting an online social presence. Jennings, Sutherlin, and Counts (in press) provided student responses on how they felt an instructor could project this social presence. These included things such as using social media, answering email promptly, posting video lectures, having flexible office hours, and making personal connections. All of these seem like reasonable suggestions for increasing the social presence of the instructor. In both categories it was clear that both gender and ethnicity appeared to influence the importance of social presence. As previously shown, both males and females indicated a much lower level of importance placed on the social presence from fellow classmates as compared to social presence from the instructor. However, males were less likely to indicate Very important/Important and much more like to indicate Not very important/Unimportant than were females when addressing the importance of social presence felt from the instructor. Rovai and Baker (2005) suggested it was possible, “that some online students, particularly those with a more independent and autonomous learning style preference, may not be interested in developing a sense of classroom community and might consider doing so counterproductive to their own learning or not worth the time required to engage in meaningful interactions” (p. 41).

Keeping student perceptions in mind when working with students can also help to improve course interaction. Studies suggest that in some ethnic groups it may be important to also incorporate synchronous as well as asynchronous communication methods. There are many online tools available that can assist in promoting social presence, both with the instructor and with fellow students. Taking the time to learn these and use them could provide higher retention, not to mention higher student evaluations.

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Action Research: Using Assessment Results to Improve the Business Communication Course

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Accrediting institutions frequently require the collection of assessment information on programs and key courses in a business education curriculum. After determining what information should be assessed, the next step in the process of creating an assessment is to actually collect the data. After collection, however, the real work is analyzing and acting on the data. The purpose of this article is to discuss how assessment information can be used to revise the curriculum in the business communication course to provide a better learning experience for students.

Introduction

In a Texas state university's college of business accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (SACS) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), assessment is required. In addition, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) also requires assessment of courses for the core curriculum. The business communication course at the sophomore level is part of the University's core curriculum and the foundation for business required of all business majors, therefore this course is part of the assessment process.

As part of the 12-hour requirement for communication courses, the business communication course is a standard selection for students throughout the university. Each semester the college offers 14-16 sections (32 students per section) of the course by 5-7 different business instructors. With approximately 450-500 students each semester, the course population is approximately two-thirds non-business majors and one third business majors. The course is an interesting mix of students from all majors across campus. Although the course is offered at the sophomore level, it is common for students of all classifications to be in each section.

Assessment Overview

Educational institutions often have several accrediting bodies that oversee the learning process. The university for this study is assessed by all three: SACS, AACSB, and THECB. Each of these governing bodies has unique, but related goals that create adjustments in curriculum and assessment. These many changes create an evolving process as each entity makes changes to its requirements.

The AACSB originally adopted Assurance of Learning (AoL) guidelines in 1991, which were updated in 2003, 2013, and 2017. Guidelines are vague and simply state that "high-quality business schools have processes for determining for each degree program learning goals that are relevant and appropriate" (AACSB, 2017). The goal is continuous improvement and creating effective and continuous

assessments (Djoundourian, 2017). Similarly, SACS' (2010) guidelines state that schools are to engage in ongoing and documented quality enhancement procedures to support the educational institution's stated mission. In Fall 2014, the THECB (2015) required assessment of all core courses to meet new learning objectives. Approved core courses should include critical thinking skills, communication skills (written, oral, and visual), teamwork, social responsibility, and personal responsibility.

Assessment can take many forms, and with broad guidelines provided, each institution must create its own unique assessment process. Both direct and indirect methods of assessment have critically changed how effective assessment can be. Items such as pretests, posttests, and rubrics can make the assessment process easier. In addition, these measures provide opportunities for continual course improvement as well as student improvement (Carter, 2017).

McConnell, Hoover, & Miller (2008) discuss looking at student outcomes at a micro level to assess student learning and inform faculty of needed improvements in their courses. Using course embedded assessments (CEA) is one process to assess individual student learning. CEAs use existing documents already used in the class to measure student learning and consider improvements (McConnell, Hoover, & Miller, 2008.) Using existing assignments limits the additional work that faculty often dislike about the assessment process. Faculty acceptance of the assessment instrument will help the program's success (Djoundourian, 2017).

The purpose of assessment is improving learning and making changes to "close the loop." Closing the loop can include measures such as offering new or modified courses, sharing pedagogical practices among instructors, and coordinating activities and assignments between sections (Martell, 2007). McConnell, Hoover, and Miller (2008) state that "CEA investigations provide one of the most specific, targeted methods of assessing student learning" (p. 25), and the results can lead to updated and relevant course material, assignments, pedagogies, and reading materials. This study will present a process how one university used CEAs for assessment to close the loop and improve the learning in one business course.

An Exploration of the Unique Assessment Process

As the assessment discussion first began in 2005, faculty of the course took a proactive approach. Collectively, the department created an assessment plan to begin its own evaluation system. The total assessment can be divided into two phases:

Phase I – EEO Assessment

From 2006-2012, the business communication course assessment was linked to six EEO Assessment objectives established by the THECB for courses like business communication. The six objectives included:

1. Writing and speaking including revisions and editing
2. Analyzing audience and purpose
3. Applying different modes of expression (i.e. persuasion)
4. Working in groups
5. Using critical thinking
6. Applying research techniques

The faculty developed a plan that would use three different activities to measure two objectives at a time over a three-semester period. The persuasive letter measured Objectives 3 and 5 in Fall 2006. Embedded test questions measured Objectives 2 and 4 in Spring 2007. A researched written report

measured Objectives 1 and 6 for the first time in Fall 2007. Over the next seven years, changes to the assignments were made after review of the assessment results.

For the first cycles of the 2006-2012 system using the persuasive letter and the research report, faculty used their own assignment. As internal assessment began, inconsistencies in assignments caused difficulties for assessment.

Persuasive Letters and Research Reports. For the persuasive letters, the assessor might have to read several different assignment prompts in order to assess the associated letters. A bigger issue existed with the research reports. For example, some faculty required the use of primary research with graphs and charts, but others only used secondary research. One faculty member designed the report rubric, making it difficult to apply that rubric for all assignments. To resolve these problems in later assessments, the faculty decided to develop one persuasive assignment (See Appendix A) and one research report topic for all sections for future semesters. The rubrics were redesigned to better fit the common assignments. Streamlining these assignments allowed for more uniformity in assignment requirements and analysis.

Revision of the research report assignment proved to be a more difficult task. In the first assessment of the research report, the analysis focused on the difference between the assignment requirements, which made it very difficult to understand actual student performance. Only 53.3% of students received an acceptable score for research, 63.3% earned an acceptable score for mechanics, and 66.7% of students scored an acceptable score for analysis. As a result, common assignment instructions were created for uniformity. However, by the next measurement in Spring 2009, the students again did not meet the criteria as only 56.2% had an acceptable score. This time, faculty developed student handouts and agreed that using more resources from the university's librarians was key to success. By the Fall 2010 measurement, 74% of the students had met the established criteria which showed progress. By Spring 2012, three of the four criteria scored an average ranking 77.8% of the time. Although student submissions met the criteria, the faculty felt students were still having trouble finding quality research and in citing it correctly with APA style. They recommended additional assignments be given before the report assignment.

After review of the results by the University Assessment Committee (the overseer of all core assessment), it was determined that the current team report was not an appropriate way to judge this critical skill. The assignment was adapted to an individual report, and the assessment was repeated. For Fall of 2013, 48 reports were assessed and a score of average or higher was recorded 84.4% of the time, therefore meeting the goal.

Teamwork. Of the three assessment approaches, the easiest to complete was the embedded questions for team assessment. Because everyone used the same questions selected from the testbank, the results were more consistent. In the Spring 2007 results, 80% of students answered at least 70% of the questions correctly. Only one question about the roles of groups scored low at 65.4%. In order to solicit better student responses, the faculty decided to place more emphasis on that topic. During the next assessment cycle (Spring 2008), the results slipped to 54.6%. At that time, the faculty decided to revise the question because the wording might be unclear. In the Fall of 2009 and the Spring of 2011, the percentage goal of 70% was met, so no changes were made.

In 2012 the University Assessment Committee determined that team performance could not be effectively measured by asking embedded questions. After seven years of relying on embedded questions, assessment changed in Spring 2014 to require students to write a reflective paper on the team experience. This paper was assessed on a university approved rubric of Capstone (4), Accomplished (3), Developing (2), Beginning (1), and Unacceptable (0). The goal was for students to earn at least a 2

(Developing) on the rubric. Three random submissions from each section were used in the assessment showed that overall, 83.3% of the submissions from face-to-face students earned the desired score of 2 or higher on all five items in the rubric. However, only 66.7% of the online students achieved a score of 2 or higher. Online instructors were tasked with developing strategies to provide a better experience for teams with online students. These strategies were discussed with the students and added as expectations for the presentation. In addition, the faculty felt that teams needed intermediate due dates for parts of the project. By collecting research by a certain point, the team would have more time to work together to develop the overall presentation. By offering mid-point tasks, the team members would have more time to discuss and work together. This could be as simple as posting on a team discussion board or as difficult as doing collaborative writing.

Phase II Assessment – 6 Goals of THECB

Eight years into the process, the THECB revised the university core courses in the state of Texas for all public two and four-year universities. The new plan was to have all courses in the core curriculum cover the six new key areas (critical thinking skills; communication skills including written, oral, and visual; teamwork; personal responsibility; empirical and quantitative skills; and social responsibility). The first assessment plan devised at the university level required Business Communication to assess the first four areas.

The Business Communication faculty developed new assignments to meet each of the new objectives. Teamwork was assessed using a reflective writing assignment that evaluated how the team functioned, and social responsibility was assessed through an ethical decision-making activity. To assess the critical thinking and written communication objective, the Business Communication faculty created a new assignment termed the Informative Blog requiring students to research two sides of a business topic, then choose and justify one side of the argument.

Submissions of all assignment for each of the objectives were collected and analyzed at the university level for all core courses. This created a tremendous amount of student work to collect and analyze, so the Provost determined to only assess a more focused set of assignments for these objectives. Because the Business Communication course is considered writing-intensive, it was to assess only written communication every other Fall semester.

Research in Action Summary

Deciding what to assess and collecting the data is only the first part of research related to assessment. The bigger purpose is to decide what to change and revise to improve results in the next assessment period. The goal should always be student learning. An individual instructor may look at their course periodically to determine what worked and what did not. Asking questions such as "Did students seem to grasp the concept?" can be an informal first assessment. If students still seem confused after an explanation, there may be a better way to present the information. Students often ask for an example, so being prepared to provide one or more for each concept can be helpful. However, this is not the only way to assess learning. While individual teachers often look at their own process, it is not as frequent that a course and the student work are examined. Our assessment focused only on student work, not the effectiveness of any particular instructor.

Each assessment illustrated different aspects of our teaching. In the persuasive letter, we found we were effective at teaching format with scores in the 90% or higher. However, grammar, spelling, and punctuation presented challenges. Although the basic college English courses were prerequisites,

students were not transferring these skills to other classes. This finding compelled the need for a grammar review before beginning the writing portion of the class.

For an overall review of our assessment process, the faculty worked together to compile common assignments, handouts for students, guidelines for faculty, and other materials that provided consistency and improvement in the course. This process helped us to coordinate teaching to create a common experience for all students. We also learned a lot about each other and our different teaching styles. Learning about each other and sharing information helped improve all sections. Although tedious at time, the process was an enjoyable way to improve teaching as we learned from each other when sharing ideas (Wright, 2013).

According to Djoundourian (2017), “each school is defined uniquely by its mission” (p. 243) is an important idea. While reviewing assessment outcomes, the original learning goals for the institution must be maintained. The assessment should be unique to the institution and insure that the students are learning what the institution determined is the most important. Djoundourian notes, “The critical issue in assessment of learning is for faculty to identify the specific problem that students have and propose a solution” (p. 243). Our assessment did this: it helped us to recognize problems and create solutions to solving the problems.

In conclusion, working as a faculty team in the assessment process improved the learning process, enhanced our teaching, and built a community in our faculty. Hopefully, others can learn from our experiences that combining the ideas of faculty, you can come up with quality results.

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Appendix A

Persuasive Message

Instructions: You work as a **Cruise Specialist** for Sunbright Travel Agency. Your company received an email message from Marva Smithson asking for information about cruises for Summer 2020. Mrs. Smithson is trying to plan a summer trip in June or July of 2020. She has never taken a cruise, but is interested in what is available. Mrs. Smithson is traveling with her 23 year old daughter Marlynn. The cruise is to celebrate Marlynn's May graduation from college.

Your goal is to go online and research a possible cruise. Try www.royalcaribbean.com or www.carnival.com or www.princess.com. Select a cruise in the time frame indicated that could be of interest to Mrs. Smithson and Marlynn.

Write a persuasive message encouraging them to take the cruise you describe. If cost information is available, feel free to use that information. If cost information is not available, estimate the cost of the cruise at $4000 to $5000 for the trip.

In addition to mentioning the cost of the cruise, you want to have at least three other key points to use in your persuasive argument. Try to determine what your audience (Mrs. Smithson and Marlynn) would be interested in. Be sure to follow the persuasive approach in writing your letter.

Letterhead Address: Sunbright Travel Agency, 2013 Adventure Lane, St. Paul, Minnesota 55107
Send letter to: Marva Smithson, 48211 North Central Place, Detroit, Michigan 48207
End the letter with your name and title.
At the bottom of the letter, include the web site where you found your information.