WDI Impact Assessment for CSC290 – 20159-20161 Academic year

Previous CSC290 students have often commented that they did not find CSC290 to be relevant enough to their program or to have enough Computer Science specific content. In recent iterations, we have added more Computer Science specific topics such as the Unified Modelling Language (UML). The WDI funding has allowed us to teach and evaluate students in both UML (and other topics covered in the course), as well as student writing.

With the WDI funding in the 2015-2016 academic year, we were able to provide students an opportunity to practice academic writing skills through multiple writing assignments.

In the 20159 term students completed two critical reviews and a report.
In the 20161 term, students completed a critical review and a position paper.

In each term, these papers are also complimented with smaller writing exercises including discussion board posts and other short, frequent writing exercises, as well as group writing assignments.

Many students failed to follow the formatting guidelines and/or cite appropriately on their first assignment. In CSC290, they are provided with follow up opportunities to correct these issues with their writing.

In each term, students were required to revise one of their writing assignments based on the feedback that the TAs provided. This activity highly encouraged students to look at the feedback provided on their writing and to act upon them.

When asked to comment on the editing exercise, a limited number of students who responded to the survey in the 20159 term said:

- *I think the self editing exercise is a great way to improve ones language. When receiving essays back, in most cases I just look at them and see the error I make and hope I wont do it again. However, with the self editing exercise, I have motivation to look at my mistakes and try to fix them as I will be receiving something that will benefit me. Also, it motivated me to read my essay and find more mistakes and see how I could fix them. As a result, my next essay would be a lot better as I would aim to not make the same mistakes.*
- *This was a good exercise. I feel that some of the comments were [subjective], but for the most part, I enjoyed learning from the experience.*
- *Felt like this made more of a difference since it was feedback from the TA who was actually marking our work. He knew what he was looking for and guided us accordingly.*
- *I liked the exercise. It forced me to contemplate on my mistakes and engineer solutions to fixing them.*
- *The opportunity to rewrite something I wrote in the past was really good. I hope that in the future I'm able to see my own mistakes (so that I don't need a TA to point them out to me).*

While not all the comments were positive, the majority of respondents indicated that the exercise was effective. However, the TAs commented that marking was slightly more time consuming when they were making comments on which students could perform revisions.

Lesson learned: The editing exercise seems to be quite helpful/successful; however, TAs need to be allowed more time to properly assess the assignments for this exercise.

In the 20159 term, students provided feedback to stating that writing 2 critical reviews on the same topic (two sides of a particular argument) was redundant and unnecessary.

In the 20161 term, we took this feedback into consideration and had students write 1 critical review and 1 position paper instead. But we found that some students who failed to master the critical review format, also struggled with the position paper format.

Lesson learned: in future, perhaps 2 critical reviews on significantly different topics/issues may help students master the format and allow those who don't get it right the first time have another try at it.

In the 20159 term, 6% of the course grade was allocated to student participation in the course discussion board.   We ran the discussions in 3 rounds of 2 weeks each. For each round, students were encouraged to post at least 3 messages to each other on the discussion board about the given topic(s). Due to the sheer volume of posts expected (~100 students x 3 posts each x 3 rounds), we told the students that we would only select one round at random to be marked.

In the midterm feedback for the L0101 section, several students indicated their dislike of the discussion board exercise and/or the way it was run. While only about 18% of respondents commented on their dislike of the discussion exercise, it was one of the more consistent items listed. One student commented that he/she did not appreciate contributing to discussions that may never be marked. One student actually indicated that he/she liked the discussion activity. L0201 did not solicit a midterm feedback.

Despite the fact that the exercise was worth marks, not all students participated in the discussions.

In the 20161 term, we only had one round of discussion exercise which was used to prepare students for a specific course topic. While we didn't solicit specific feedback about the exercise, it seemed like more students participated and we received no complaints about the exercise itself.

Lesson learned: Limited discussion exercise as a preparation for a specific course topic seems to work well and warrants another try.

In the 20159 term, students were randomly assigned a peer's Critical Review paper. Students were expected to grade their peer's paper according to the same rubric that the TA's used. Students were not required to provide comments, just a grade. The grade that students gave were allowed to be up to 30% higher or lower than the TAs. In retrospect, I think this is too wide of a margin. No student fell out of this range. The highest AND lowest difference was 26% above and below the TA given grade. The differences in TA given grade and peer given grade varied widely.

We did not do this again in the 20161 term as we felt it was not as beneficial as the self-editing exercise. Additionally, the peer review exercise took too much time to setup, track, and administer.

Lesson learned: In any future peer review exercises, students should be expected to come to a grade for their peer that is closer to the TAs grade, within a 10% higher or lower, rather than 30%. Students who assess their peer beyond this range should be required to provide additional explanation for the assessment.