

WDI Final Report: GGR277

Social Research Methods, Winter 2015

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Writing Instruction Provided:

The original plan for GGR277 was to provide the TA's with additional training and support and then to have that filter down to the students through formative feedback during tutorials and on drafts of assignments. In all honesty, students got even less support and feedback this year than they did last year, but that is not the fault of the program or the course design. It was simply a result of the strike. First of all, I was forced to drop the third assignments because it required TA supervision according to the ethics review board. This meant that students did not have time or opportunity to build upon their earlier assignments and feedback. Secondly, students did not have tutorial for a third of the semester and thus did not have feedback from their TA's. I did my best to meet student needs during the semester, but I was unable to provide the writing instruction necessary to meet the goals of the WDI for this course.

Writing Activities:

The redesign from last year was intended to change the structure of the assignments to provide multiple points of formative feedback while also building from basic descriptive writing to more conceptual analysis. Rather than the original two assignments, students were to complete a total of four. There were three mini-research assignments in which students learned how to describe their methods, formally discuss their results, and informally assess the potential and limitations of the specific methods used. Each of these assignments spanned three weeks from introduction to final report, with students receiving formative feedback in the middle week. The fourth and final assignment was a research proposal drawing on one of the three earlier assignments as preliminary research. This assignment was designed to incorporate conceptual analysis and creativity as students had to write a research question supported by a review of the literature and their preliminary research.

In the end, the students completed two mini-research assignments and the research proposal. They also completed two writing assignments during tutorial to help clarify the difference between first and third person writing styles.

Evaluation of Effectiveness:

In addition to the problems caused by the strike, the logistics of the assignments distracted from the learning objectives. In particular, having two assignments that required students to design research instruments, get consent forms signed, do interviews or surveys, and then write-up their data became a logistical nightmare. More time was spent on explaining logistics than in giving writing instruction and feedback. As one student commented in the anonymous end-of-term course evaluations, "The assignments were short but each assignment has a very close date, making it hard to catch up if any information was missed." Timing and logistics are a concern for future iterations of this project.

For the writing instruction that was provided, the TA's and I struggled with being able to meet students' needs given the huge breadth in their abilities and backgrounds. While some students needed foundational instruction on how to match their verb tenses or their pronouns, others viewed this kind of instruction as high school-ish and as a waste of time.

Despite these struggles, the students were able to identify the connection between the writing assignments and the course material, as made evident in questions 4 and 5 of the following summary of their evaluation of the course:

Scale: 1 - Not At All 2 - Somewhat 3 - Moderately 4 - Mostly 5 - A Great Deal

Question	Summary	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
I found the course intellectually stimulating.	3.8	1.1
The course provided me with a deeper understanding of the subject matter.	4.0	1.0
The instructor (Nicole Laliberte) created an atmosphere that was conducive to my learning.	4.4	1.0
Course projects, assignments, tests, and/or exams improved my understanding of the course material.	4.0	1.1
Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams provided opportunity for me to demonstrate an understanding of the course material.	4.1	1.0
Institutional Composite Mean	4.0	1.0

This favourable rating makes continued efforts to improve the writing assignments for this course feasible as the students understand the importance of the assignments and will (ideally) be open to receiving more instruction to improve their writing abilities.

Future Directions:

Due to the strike, I do not think it is fair to judge the effectiveness of the WDI program for this course based on the past semester. Not only were we not able to provide the necessary supports to the students, we were also not able to document the effectiveness of the program without TA support and tutorial meetings. Nevertheless, some design flaws in last year's WDI did become apparent and will be addressed in future iterations of the course. In particular, the logistical burden created by the numerous mini-research assignments will be stream-lined as much as possible.

My goal for GGR277 continues to be helping students improve their discipline specific writing skills. Learning how to write about the research process, communicating findings, and assessing the ethical ramifications of research are all skills necessary for success in Geography. I look forward to continuing to shape this course's assessments to better meet students' needs and improve their writing skills.