WDI Final Report: GGR202

Geographies of Canada, Winter 2016

Nicole Laliberté

Writing Instruction Provided:

The re-design of GGR202 changed the assignments and the writing instruction provided to improve the opportunities for students to receive feedback and improve their writing skills. The general concept of the original assignments remained; the students were to do research on contemporary debates, write annotated bibliographies and then a final paper. However, rather than do this once during the semester through a single large project, students did smaller versions of it three times. Thus, for each of the three major themes of the course (Aboriginal rights, resource economies, and immigration), students wrote a short annotated bibliography with four sources related to an aspect of the debate they are interested in. This was followed by a short paper that expresses an opinion supported by research. Tutorials were used to guide students through this process, give them feedback, and eventually support them in giving each other feedback.

Writing Activities:

There were four TAs teaching eight tutorial sections this year in GGR202. Gurveer Bains acted as the head TA, designing tutorials and communicating expectations to the other TAs. Some of the tutorials covered content review, but the majority of them were focused on writing instruction ranging from how to find sources to how to write an effective annotated bibliography to how to develop and communicate a policy argument. The goal of the three different thematic writing activities was to give students a chance to get meaningful feedback from their TAs – students were provided feedback from one assignment at least a week or two before the next was due.

Evaluation of Effectiveness:

While I do not have any evidence of the effectiveness of specific parts of this process from a student perspective (this is a major oversight on my part and something I will address in future WDI projects), there is very strong evidence that there was inconsistency in the TA delivery of the material. Take, for example, the following statements drawn from the student online survey (SOS):

Both professors and TAs were helpful at providing support. My TA especially sent us important resources which were helpful when I was writing my policy briefs.
i did not attend tutorials because it did not feel helpful to me. That being said, Professor Laliberté allowed us to ask for clarification while in class, so that it was discussed as a whole rather than individually.
Paulina Kubara was an engaging and helpful TA,
TA help available throughout the semester as well as professor office hours
Always available for help. Ta was not as good as professor
Our TAs during tutorials were amazing.

The following statements are even more explicit about their disappointment with tutorials:

I liked prof. Laliberte's teaching style (less focused on slides and more focused on interactive learning). I also liked having the lecturers and videos to supplement the topics we were learning about.

However, the tutorials were absolutely useless and a huge waste of time. I feel like we shouldn't have tutorials just for the sake of having them... I think it would be a better idea to increase the percentage for class participation and just take away tutorials for next year. I hate to say this but in my 4 years this was the first time I felt like a course was wasting my time (I'm just talking about the tutorials here, not the lectures)

Professor Laliberte's instruction of the course was excellent. The material in lecture was fantastic and it was always interesting to go to class. I enjoyed the structure and the material taught and found that it was always taught in a way conductive to my learning. I enjoyed the use of different material such as movies, articles and other aids that helped to foster my understanding of the course material.

Although I found lecture interesting, I was very disappointed in the tutorial that were run. I felt like my TA never had control of the class and was not interested in teaching students at all. The tutorial would usually finish 10-20 minutes early and I would leave feeling like I had not gained anything from the session at all. I did not feel like they helped with the assignments or tests in anyway. This was created by not only by a disinterest from students but also a seeming disinterest by our TA to not engage in conversation or try to promote further discussion. It was difficult to go to tutorial when it felt like a waste of time especially when it was part of our participation mark in the course. Although I was satisfied with the rest of the course, the tutorial experience took away from the overall value of the course.

These comments are in stark contrast to the SOS comments from GGR277. I believe that the hierarchical system I created (using a head TA) contributed to these issues. While it did streamline things for me administratively, I believe it created too much distance between myself and the other TA's such that they were not as invested in the project of the course. The head TA was an experiment this year. I do not plan to repeat it in the future.

These students response might explain the drop in student evaluations regarding course assignments and tests. This year's SOS average was .2 points lower than last year's (listed second).

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.	3.6	1.1
The course provided me with a deeper understanding of the subject matter.	3.7	1.1
The instructor (Nicole Laliberte) created an atmosphere that was conducive to my learning.	4.0	1.1
Course projects, assignments, tests, and/or exams improved my understanding of the course material.	3.6	0.9
Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams provided opportunity for me to demonstrate an understanding of the course material.	3.6	1.0
Institutional Composite Mean	3.7	1.0

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.	3.9	1.0
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.	4.5	0.8
Course projects, assignments, tests, and/or exams improved my understanding of the course material.	3.8	1.1
Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams provided opportunity for me to demonstrate an understanding of the course material.	3.8	1.1
Institutional Composite Mean	4.0	1.0

In terms of the writing assignments, I am not clear how the iterative rather than scaffolded assignment design affected student writing performance. In my scaffolded design from last year, it was not possible to compare assignments as each assignment required a different kind of writing task. This year the assignments were repetitive – designed this way to provide for the development of specific writing skills. The average marks for the assignments, however, do not follow a predictable trend of improvement. Rather, the first one had an average of 70%, the second was 68% and the third was 72%. Ultimately, there was an improvement, but it is unclear what happened with the middle assignment.

Future Directions:

I am taking a year off from teaching this course so I am not implementing any immediate changes. However, I will continue to consider this course as I am confused by the results of this year's WDI. The fact that things did not go well this year highlighted the need for more feedback from students. I hope to work with the RGASC to design more effective methods for assessing assignment design and instruction provision.