ABSTRACT

The excitement was palpable as the day had finally come – Research Day! Introduction to Psychology students in a community college who were earning vocational and transfer degrees had become fledging researchers, exuberant to share their knowledge with peers, instructors, their families and community members. Students presented their research using mediums of traditional posters and/or interactive, digital versions. The teaching leading up to Research Day included group activities to enhance persistence in learning and a sense of community. The purpose of this study was to assess students’ perceptions of research through a pre/post survey with three variables: interest in psychology, academic efficacy and project-based learning /group work. Assessment measurements revealed changes among students indicating increased academic commitment through the lens of research.

Keywords: Academic Efficacy, Digital Poster, Knowledge-Sharing, Library, Retention, Social Web Technology, Student Engagement, Undergraduate Student Research, Vocational Education

As an Introduction to Psychology instructor teaching both students who are earning vocational degrees (ie. fire services, mental health certificate, interior design) and two-year transfer degrees (intent to earn four-year degrees) within the same classroom, it was my quest to deliver the curriculum in such a tremendously engaging way that a commitment to learning and sense of community would be developed within the classroom amongst this diverse student body. Literature shows that undergraduate students’ engagement in social sciences research increases their connectivity to the classroom and furthers their commitment to academic pursuits (Drake, 2011; Guterman, 2007; Ishiyama, 2002). A sense of community among students has shown strengthened connectivity to learning (Harris, 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

My colleague, a Reference and Instruction Librarian, also shares a passion in helping students conduct research with the added vision of incorporating technology into the knowledge-sharing aspect of the process. A solid partnership was formed between our disciplines of psychology and library science to better offer opportunities for our students to experience and embrace research with fervor and produce
a greater impact on our wider college community. A closer examination of published work exposed a void regarding vocational students completing research within introductory curriculum as well as a lack of information about incorporating social Web technology into the research process as a tool for sharing knowledge with the public.

Most community college classrooms regularly combine vocational and two-year transfer degree students—a group which notably varies by discipline pursuits, age, socio-economic background, parental and marriage status (Friedman & Mandel, 2009). Amidst this occasionally chaotic diversity of degree paths and lifestyles, Introduction to Psychology students find significant common ground in their shared uncertainty, anxiety and lack of clarity experienced on the first day of class. This “group feel” is often intermingled with ambivalence or concern as to why psychology is a required part of their curriculum. When the term “research” is invoked, students’ darkening expressions are notable.

Such student reactions appear reflective of the concerning attrition rates among first-year students: fifty percent or more of students in community colleges will drop out (Berrett, 2012). These expressions also intimate decreased motivation which corresponds to research showing that students experience decreased motivation over time throughout their academic career. In an effort to increase retention and motivation rates, group activities, social Web technologies, and research were blended which left my colleague and I charging full speed ahead into a relatively unknown space.

For the topics of their research assignments, students were asked to explore an uncertainty about college life. The choice of research topic was an attempt to narrow the divide between diverse student groups as all students appear to have unanswered questions about college life. Hence, an alliance was formed among each class as realization took hold that they shared such an influential concern as well as visions of hopeful degree attainment; this common bond helped each community of learners move forward more confidently in their group activities and in the research process.

The purpose of this study was to assess Introduction to Psychology students’ perceptions of learning psychology and research using a pre and post survey with three measures: project-based learning/group work; academic efficacy; and, interest in psychology. Research questions: 1. Can research teachings about psychology using group activities improve academic interests? 2. Are there differences in result measurements between vocational and transfer students?

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING/ GROUP ACTIVITIES

Project-based learning is a term used interchangeably with problem-based learning, and this teaching venue has been shown to enhance student learning and motivation. This form of learning is often implemented via group activities. While considering learning outcomes, project-based learning has been assessed by the involvement and effectiveness of the instructor and the student culture/team approach among students (Krishnan, Gabb, & Vale, 2011). Real-world problem-solving is an integral part of project-based learning and motivation toward the acquisition of necessary skills including: the ability to think critically, apply theory, and transition concepts from learning in the classroom to professional application (Choi & Kyunghwa, 2008). As project-based learning appears to evolve with the learner from the classroom into direct application outside of the classroom, interest has shown to increase in the learners’ commitment to the subject matter (Kempler, 2006).

Research within Undergraduate Curriculum

Literature shows positive correlations to students’ participation in research which include: academic commitment, self-efficacy, working independently, and further understanding of the process of social sciences (Lopatto, 2010).
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