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Does the Creation of an Outline Prior to Writing a Draft Enhance the Quality of Students' Papers?

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WRITING RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP WRITE-UP

Title of Study

Does the Creation of an Outline Prior to Writing a Draft Enhance the Quality of Students' Papers?

Researchers' Names and Department

Prof. Karen Bradley, Department of Sociology
Michael Manley (student, graduated at end of quarter)

Research Question

Does the development of an outline prior to writing an extensive research paper positively impact the quality of the student's final paper?

Process

We discussed the assignment in class (see attached), breaking down the writing component into the several steps necessary to create a coherent paper

1. Development of research question
2. The purpose and process of literature review
3. Compilation of data
4. Submission of paper outline
5. Submission of Literature Review
6. Submission of First Draft
7. Submission of Final Paper

Key Findings

Several writing proficiency issues became apparent early. Students' writing skills varied considerably, akin to a normal curve distribution. Students' ability to conceptualize the organization of the paper also varied considerably. Two students were extremely weak in these areas. This was surprising, given that this was the capstone course. Students were graduating at the end of the quarter.

Less experienced and less proficient writers seem to benefit most from the use of an outline prior to producing a draft. This also seemed to be more helpful for students who had been away from a formal school setting for some time. One student especially fit this category. I had worked with him previously in a required sociological theory WP course that I taught.

By coincidence, I had reviewed the use of outlines and required an outline from students in that theory class, as well. I had also discussed paragraph construction and thesis sentences, as I did in my capstone class. The theory papers were only three pages long, but included conceptual complexity as they required the application of abstract theories (Marx, for example) to concrete situations. This was also a WP class so revisions were also required.

Implications for Teaching and Learning/ Implications for Further Study

It seems that explicit instruction in these organizational elements is especially helpful in two kinds of situations:

1. When the subject matter is abstract and therefore difficult for some to disentangle and apply in a logical fashion.
2. When students have had little recent prior experience writing, *or* have received little feedback on their writing recently. The latter case seems to apply more to returning students and/or some students from community colleges.

Observations on Faculty-Student Co-inquiry Process

I have mixed reactions to this. The student whom I selected was unavailable when it was time for the paper assessment. Also, in such a small class with individually selected projects, privacy issues are difficult since we discussed each other's papers frequently. It is unclear how students feel about having their classmates assess their written work, *and* whether students would have sufficient expertise. This would be something that sociology faculty typically would assign to a teaching assistant who had been successful in the subject matter of the class previously, *and* had demonstrated sufficient writing proficiency. In other words, it can be difficult for a student in the class to assess the work of their classmates while they are learning the substance of the

material itself. It is difficult to separate writing from content since writing can appear flawed while the issue is more confusion about the subject matter itself.