

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Community College Students Deriving Value from a First-Year Seminar Curriculum

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The purpose of this instrumental case study was to understand how community college students derive value from a first-year seminar curriculum. In this study, situated within the tenets of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), I aimed to better understand how students perceived a first-year seminar curriculum designed with the following four steps: reflect, visualize, write, and plan. Students recorded instances of perceived personal growth and soft skill application through writing assignments standard in all first-year seminar courses. They also incorporated visual mediums in response to photo prompts which was specific to this study. Sixteen students volunteered to participate in the study by allowing me to collect their assignments from two *Student Success* sections of which I was the instructor. Participation in an interview about their experience at the end of the term was also voluntary. While ideal for students to have submitted all coursework as well as visual responses to the photo prompts in order to participate in photo-elicitation interviews, students who completed any components of the course were eligible to participate in this study. Of the 16 participants, nine took part in the interview.

As I reviewed these data made up of course assignments, photos, and interviews, I highlighted excerpts and assigned one or more codes to the excerpt. I sorted the coded data and transferred these excerpts by code into a new document broken down by code, by section (summer or fall), by participant, and then by source (interview or assignment). After reviewing these data numerous times, the following four overarching themes developed: (a) personal growth; (b) skill improvement; (c) relationship building; and (d) self-expression. Self-awareness and self-reflection were the undercurrent running through the entire course. Throughout the course, students were asked to look for application of soft, or transferable, skills within their academic, career, and personal roles and to share examples these skills now and in the future.

The course traditionally met for two hours once a week for eight weeks, but this case study involved virtual delivery courses because of COVID-19. In a researcher's journal, I reflected on this experience as an instructor and this information led to adjustments for the next term. This practice was SoTL in action. It takes deliberate development for successful first-year seminar programming and curriculum to be adaptable for students of all ages, educational backgrounds, and life experiences. By focusing on soft skills and personal reflection, the curriculum was applicable to students no matter their academic goal. With continued changes in modality, deliberate design will be critical in a student's sense of belonging. Implications for the future are broken down by the following key stakeholders: students, faculty, and administration. Only two of these 16 students were in their first semester of college and only one was under 20 years old. While not odd in my experience teaching first-year seminars at a community college, it led to a recommendation of specifically looking at true first-year students and how they derive value from this curriculum for comparison to returning students. Conducting this study in a face-to-face setting may have produced more visuals in response to the photo prompts as well.