

Retrospective Paper

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November 25, 2011

Introduction

There is a Peruvian proverb that says: *"Little by little, one walks far."* This wise saying aptly illustrates the approach I took in taking MEDT 8484, Research Seminar. Students at any level face new concepts, information, teaching styles, delivery techniques, and classroom social dynamics every semester as they fulfill degree requirements. The courage to keep growing, keep inquisitive, and keep a positive attitude is essential to becoming a successful lifelong learner. This retrospective paper will provide a student's perspective of some of the more important elements of the course including online discussions, peer reviews, lessons learned, new skills acquired, and how building a research plan from the ground up impacted my learning. Further, the paper will explore ideas about how future students taking the course might flourish. Finally, the paper will allow me to role play as the teacher of a future Research Seminar online class and explore how I might add value to that hypothetical scenario. The bottom line is this: Research Seminar is a graduate level course that will equip students to be confident and competent in preparing a research design plan should they ever be called up on to do so.

Question 1: The Process of Writing My Research Plan

The process is important. Many students want to go directly from Point A to Point G to save time. But invaluable lessons can be learned at Points B-F. The research plan was a major part of this course. The course was strategically designed to have that end in mind from its beginning. Engaging discussions in CourseDen ensued in a particular order that significantly helped prepare the stage for the research design final submission:

- Post 2 – Research question
- Post 3 – Quantitative or qualitative approach plus population & content
- Post 4 – Methods including design & procedures, collection tools, & strategies

- Post 5 – Theoretical framework & plan for data analysis
- Post 6 – IRB forms draft

One example that stands out to me occurred in Post 2. I was about to “overshoot the runway” with a research problem that was far too ambitious and Dr. Baylen quickly helped me bring things into clarity with this response: “David -- a bit big. Have you thought of narrowing it down? You may ask maybe -- What makes library services for the visually impaired patron innovative, effective, and successful? What are the indicators based on the literature?” (Baylen, personal communication, September 14, 2011). This response was a turning point for me in my research design plan.

The four- and six-article critique & synthesis assignments were a tremendously helpful part of the process. Johnson and Christensen (2012) provide an excellent chapter in our textbook on “How to Write a Research Proposal.” Help came from every direction: peer review commentary in discussion boards, thoughtful feedback from Dr. Baylen, and Machi and McEvoy (2009) provided six steps to success in their book, *The Literature Review*, to ensure that students had the necessary tools to write a well-designed literature review as part of their research design plan. The process of providing incremental “baby steps” to construct our first research design plan serves a model template of how to do it right.

Question 2: The Role of CourseDen Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are, to my view, an indispensable part of any course delivered online. Distance education works because people are able to interact regardless of their geographic location or time zone. So much informal learning takes place by reading and viewing the work of classmates. Following are three examples:

Peer reviewers see things we often miss. Example 1: Nancy Mortensen responded to an article I chose about manufacturers of database search engines and ADA compliance. She writes: “I found this study a bit concerning. I would think that if vendors are surveyed about their products that they in fact would find a way ... perhaps through a loophole ... to say that their products are up to standards and maybe exceed standards” (Mortensen, personal communication, October 11, 2011).

Peer reviewers offer a different point of view. Example 2: When comparing article selections in Discussion Board Four, Richard White observed: “Your study is completely different from what I am looking at. I am impressed with the use of adaptive technologies though because I used to work with Deaf and Hard of Hearing students” (White, personal communication, October 15, 2011). I feel it is important to get different, even opposing views, of our work to gain fresh insight.

Peer reviewers’ “likes and dislikes” influence our own choices. Example 3: Jessica Herrin shared her preference when choosing one of three research plan samples offered in Discussion Board Five. Jessica wrote to me: “I also preferred research plan #1. I really liked the fact that the author chose the research question as the first sentence in the plan. The research question should be clear to the reader” (Herrin, personal communication, October 26, 2011). In that discussion board, Sample Plan #1 was the hands-down winner in the majority of postings. The anonymous author’s winning design found its way into many rough drafts of research plans that we were to see in future postings.

These are three examples among many that could be given as to why discussion board interaction is vitally important in online classes.

Question 3: Positive Values Gained from Research Seminar

In every class there are positive values to be gained if one approaches the course with an open mind. I continually find myself walking away from completed University of West Georgia (UWG) courses with a sense of renewed respect for my professors as teaching professionals. Similarly, I deeply respect and admire many of my fellow graduate students. I have found both groups to be hard-working, creative, and committed to success. Other values that I feel are positive that I gained in this class include:

- Hard work brings a profit
- It pays to be diligent
- It takes discipline to succeed in a class at this advanced level
- Being inquisitive is not a nuisance but a necessity
- Professors are approachable and want you to succeed
- Helping others helps me

- We work better together
- I can learn something from nearly anyone in the class

These few examples listed in the bullet points above are only the tip of the iceberg. I have learned that sometimes classes of this nature are best understood in retrospect. That is to say, classes that require a significant investment of time, energy, critical thinking skills, and collaboration to succeed are those often remembered most enduringly.

Question 4: New Tools for the Future from Research Seminar

If someone were to ask me what I learned from this course in terms of knowledge, content, skills, application, and so forth, I would make an attempt to share what I had learned but would inevitably fall short. So much learning in this type of environment is “caught and not taught.” Having said that, I will share these big ideas and could easily elaborate on my statements to anyone interested in opening a dialogue:

- I know how to write a research problem
- I know the difference between qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods
- I know how to conduct a critique and synthesis of a collection of scholarly articles
- I know how to write a competent literature review
- I know how to use the Writing Center
- I know how to use extended resources like Smarthinking.com to enlist the help of professionals to sharpen my writing skills
- I understand the value of enlisting the help of a research coach
- I know how to utilize study aids provided by a textbook publisher to supplement my learning
- I know how to locate peer reviewed articles from academic search databases
- I better understand research ethics
- I know how to write a book review
- I know how to follow detailed instructions in format, protocol, and process
- I know how to write a research plan

The bullet points listed above are but a few of the ways I have grown as a person and graduate student directly as a result of taking Research Seminar.

Question 5: Challenges and Rewards of Online Discussion Postings

A graduate student will encounter challenges and rewards at every level of his or her journey to complete their advanced degree. As this is a retrospective paper and encourages first-person reflections as a learning device, I want to share a few of the challenges and rewards that I experienced on my own personal journey.

Challenges – Being a legally blind, disabled student posed challenges that are unique to the visually impaired. It takes me a longer to read through the postings that the average student. Also, the time lag that occurs from when I post a comment to when (and if) I receive feedback on my post can be a source of frustration. Sometimes I will post and no one responds at all. When this occurs, there is a temptation to feel some subtle form of rejection but that can be overcome when I take into consideration the busy lives and full schedules of my peers. Another caveat to online classes is just like email, saying things exclusively in writing can lose something in the translation. An emoticon may help slightly, but nonverbal communication, facial gestures, voice inflection, and the many other advantages that phone and face-to-face interaction offer are lacking in a discussion board context. That being said, there are far more pros than cons and rewards than challenges as I will discuss in the next section.

Rewards – The convenience of being able to do my work and communicate with my peers asynchronously cannot be overstated. I work two jobs in addition to attending UWG. I have never been in a place in my adult where I have had more responsibility and time demands than I do in this present season. For that reason, the flexible schedule to participate in discussions “*at my pace and at my place*” is the only possible way that this degree program could work. Further, many of my classmates are on the same Instructional Technology degree track as I am enabling us to enjoy at least some of the journey as a cohort. When I encounter former classmates in new classes, I am able to build upon prior relationships for more effective communication. Reading the opinions and insights of a diverse population is exciting, enriching, and rewarding!

Question 6: Learning How to Learn For a Lifetime

I would not be honest if I did not share that this class was a challenge to me. In the first three months, I estimate that I spent from 30-35 hours per week devoted exclusively to coursework and postings for this class. This class has been a benchmark, or perhaps it is better stated, a landmark, for me to learn how to manage my time and harness the principle of focused energy to accomplish a worthwhile objective. My personal policy is to set perfection as my objective and settle for excellence in every assignment, quiz, post, and project. I have learned how to learn better, more efficiently, and more effectively in this class. I will judge many other classes by this class in terms of time commitment and energy expenditure.

Useful tools that I can take with me is a definitive textbook on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research, a superb book on writing a literature review, a new experience with using Wimba for participating in synchronous meetings, and how to leverage web site study aids to enhance learning.

Question 7: Preparing the Next Generation of Research Seminar Students

Experience is not the best teacher; *evaluated experience* is the best teacher. If I had it to do over again, I personally would experience greater success if I had a former student give me some advice on how to succeed in this class. So, in an attempt to pass what I have learned forward, below are listed in two categories are my suggestions for improved success from two perspectives: (1) student proactive suggestions, and (2) teacher proactive suggestions.

Student proactive suggestions:

- Record the due dates of all quizzes, assignments, postings on your master calendar with tickler reminders
- Use the B Lounge prolifically (a wonderful resource!)
- Do not be afraid to ask Dr. Baylen for clarification (he is on your side)
- Do your work sooner than later (do not procrastinate; establish self-imposed deadlines ahead of teacher-imposed deadlines)

- Use research articles only for your four-article review
- Brush up on your journal article selection skills
- Visit the UWG Writing Center (in person or virtually)
- Consider using Smarthinking.com (at one time, UWG provided this service free to Diffusions of Innovations students)
- Utilize the available textbook study aid site
- Develop time management strategies to succeed in this course

Teacher proactive suggestions:

- Provide a critique & synthesis table template
- Offer a student- or teacher-led Wimba practice session for 30 minutes early in the course
- Provide examples of “A” work (like a research design plan)
- Provide realistic time budget estimates of how many hours to designate to completing coursework
- Encourage the “buddy system” (intentional availability of partners to help tutor one another)
- Take a class vote on a suitable time for Wimba sessions

The list above may better prepare future students for success. It cannot be assumed that all students will automatically know how to succeed in this course because this course is unlike any other offered at this level.

Question 8: Ideas Worth Remembering From Research Seminar

I had some very good moments in this course that are especially meaningful. I was surprised at the amount of positive feedback I received from my postings. The B Lounge supplied me with plenty of encouragement as I tried to be an encourager myself in the forum and share resources, answer questions promptly, and try to be a bit of a cheerleader. My attempts were met with acceptance and appreciation, and that only encouraged me to try harder to be an asset to my classmates. The research ethics course was extremely interesting albeit lengthy. The supplemental tools offered on the textbook web site were a great help, especially the study guides that I was able to print out.

Take aways include a whole new level of respect for a graduate level course. The standards were set high and I was very surprised as the disparity between Research Seminar and the other UWG course I was taking at the same time. I earned 100% of the points in my other class and was surprised that I struggled with earning 15 points on a quiz! Taking a “hard” class is not necessarily a bad thing if the dividends paid at the end of the course are satisfactory for the investment. I never mind or avoid hard work as long as I get rewarded grade-wise at the end of the semester. I have learned that I am good at “showing up” for class prepared, eager to learn, and ready to make a positive contribution. This is one of the few classes that I have purposed to login seven days a week and usually multiple times per day to follow discussions, check due dates, and make sure I am on track, on mission, and on time. While it is true that I have had a few “aha” moments, I look forward to having completed all of my assignments and received an appropriate grade to turn “aha” into “ahhh!”

Question 9: Research Seminar 2012, With Instructor David Robertson

This is a great question to ask to provoke thought and I appreciate it being included in this retrospective paper. First, I acknowledge that I am not an expert in this field. I think the class would unanimously agree that our instructor is indeed an expert in this area of academic study. Nevertheless, knowing all the answers has never been a prerequisite to being a teacher. A superior skill that all good teachers should possess is the ability to train and equip students to find their own answers using critical thinking skills, collaboration, and technical savvy. Below are items that I would include in my own version of Research Seminar if I were privileged to teach this course. Some items are “borrowed” from the excellent template we have been supplied by Dr. Baylen this semester, and others are additions that I would integrate having experienced the class as a student.

- **The R Lounge** – The “B Lounge” that Dr. Baylen provided in this course is a brilliant concept. His personal policy of offering a “free zone” for students to collaborate, vent, gripe, and help one another is a winner. For example, fellow student, Traci Williams, responded to one of my posts in the B Lounge: “David, I totally agree with Nan. You are da bomb :) Thanks for helping me keep my sanity & helping me pass this course. I truly believe I would not have been able to do it if it weren't for you, Nancy and a few others. THANKS.” (Williams, personal communication,

November 10, 2011). As can be seen, providing a forum in which students can help one another is an incredible asset.

- **CourseDen Exercise** – The CourseDen exercise was another ingenious idea. Not only does it set the tone for the course, and outline writing protocol for future assignments, but it also provides classmate information that often is lacking in the roster section of CourseDen. For example, Joe Tompkins writes in his CourseDen post: “This is my second semester as a student at the University of West Georgia. I am currently on track for an Ed.S. degree in Instructional Technology and I hope to have the coursework completed by December, 2012” (Tomkins, personal communication, August 26, 2011). Joe also supplied all of his contact information that offers alternative means of communication outside of CourseDen.
- **Discussion Board Posting Rubric** – Discussion boards are an integral part of distance learning and any online class. Some students enthusiastically participate providing thoughtful responses to the teacher’s leading questions. These same students are good at providing feedback to other students’ posts. However, it is not unusual in any online class for some students to remain nearly invisible and post infrequent, short, and meaningless answers that really do not contribute to the larger discussion. To remedy this type of problem, Dr. Baylen provided a rubric for discussion board interaction that clearly outlined expected participation. This rubric helped keep postings meaningful and balanced. Below is an example of the type of posting rubric taken from Discussion Board 3:

PART THREE. As part of the collaborative learning process, you are expected to discuss with your peers the ideas and summaries shared in this discussion board. Your active participation should be characterized by the following:

1. Each student should post **MORE THAN FOUR (4)** comments or replies to their peers’ postings.
2. At least one of these comments or replies should focus on **SIMILARITIES** between peer postings and those posted by the student.
3. At least one of these comments or replies should focus on **DIFFERENCES** between peer postings and those posted by the student.
4. At least a comment or reply should focus on the lessons learned from the shared peer postings to the student’s approach in finding solution to his/her research problem.
5. At least a comment or reply should include a question about the articles shared by

another student to the student's approach in finding solution to his/her research problem.

6. In each posting, a comment or reply to a posting should include the name who is receiving it. This is important to generate a sense of community building by addressing in name those who are involved in the online conversation. (Baylen, Discussion 3 rubric, September 26, 2011)

- **Provide A Menu Of Choices For Certain Projects** - Students love choices. Since all the choices on the menu can be provided by the professor, then the assignments can meet big picture course objectives. Adding the variable of allowing the student even more choice such as choosing the method of presenting the assignment (such as PowerPoint or an APA style paper of six- to ten-pages or create a blog of an audio interview) might serve the purpose of keeping students more engaged and interested. Students tend to support what they help create, and student morale, motivation, and creativity are each powerful factors in hosting a successful class, whether that class is online or face-to-face.
- **Make the Wimba Sessions Optional** – Synchronous sessions can put an undue burden on students who have opted to take an online class primarily because of the flexible schedule. Most graduate students work full-time time jobs, are married with children, are involved in church or other social organizations, and have numerous other obligations outside of class. This is why the asynchronous model works so well as for-profit online entrepreneurs like Phoenix University have discovered. Phoenix University is a multi-million dollar business and highly profitable because they cater to the demographic of working class people who have limited time available and cannot attend synchronous classes.
- **Reading of Posts Expectation** - Tell students early in the course that they do not have to read every post (close to 2,900 so far in our course).
- **Extra Credit** - Give an opportunity for extra credit so students do not have to experience undue stress over performing poorly on a quiz.
- **“Second-Chance Grading”** – I will offer second-chance grading in my courses. Second-chance grading allows a student to take my corrections and earn up to half of their points back after making the corrections and resubmitting corrected assignments. This is one of the most powerful learning tools I have personally experienced in my Master's Degree program.

- **Photos and Bios** – I will require every student to post a photo (our class was missing several) and give meaningful biographical information including at least one fun or unusual fact about themselves.
- **Sample Templates** – I will provide lots of samples and templates for students to see the quality of work I am looking for that represents a grade “A” completed assignment.
- **Work with the Students on Deadlines** – I will use the CourseDen calendar feature and the announcements feature to warn students of impending deadlines.
- **Grading and Feedback** – I will grade work promptly and provide meaningful feedback on each assignment submitted to the CourseDen dropbox.

Summary/Conclusion

When approaching a significant challenge, one anonymous sage advised: *“Inch by inch it’s a cinch, yard by yard it’s hard.”* This counsel readily applies to this course for me. Research Seminar represents a significant challenge to students like me who have never delved deeply into developing their own research design plan.

In this paper, I have attempted to provide a student’s perspective of some of the more important elements of the course including online discussions, peer reviews, lessons learned, new skills acquired, and how building a research plan from the ground up impacted my learning. Further, I have explored ideas on how future students taking the course might flourish. Finally, I have role played as the teacher of a future Research Seminar online class and entertained what good ideas I might “borrow” from Dr. Baylen’s version of the course, and how I might integrate some of my own ideas. The conclusion of the matter is this: this retrospective paper has served the excellent purpose of allowing me as a student to reflect upon the lessons learned, information gained, and skills added to my academic toolbox to confidently and competently create a research design plan should I ever be called upon to do so.

References

Johnson, B., & Christiansen, L. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches (fourth edition)*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Machi, L.A. & McEvoy, B.T. (2009). *The literature review*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.