Contributions and Text Connections: Fostering Studiousness

Study Overview:

The dreaded blank stares, looking down at the phone screen, or worse yet the student who is falling asleep. University instructors know students who respond in these ways and have watched them disengage during class meetings. Many students want to be engaged, but it is possible they do not know how to go about it. Often college students put effort into figuring out how to please the instructor, rather than investing their energy in the learning itself. This pilot study examines the efficacy of two instructional strategies, contribution roles and text connections, to encourage active involvement in the learning process, while simultaneously teaching students strategies to use to engage in their learning. My goal as an instructor is to foster an attitude of active engagement in my courses, something I call an attitude of studiousness. The focus of this pilot study is to see what happens to student engagement and learning-focus when contribution roles and text connections are included as instructional strategies in an undergraduate course. The specific research questions for this pilot study are as follows:

1. What happens when university undergraduate students are introduced to contribution roles and are asked to incorporate these roles into weekly course discussions?
   a. What happens to the degree of student contributions vs. participation over the course of a semester?
   b. What happens to the content of course discussions once students are introduced to contribution roles vs. participation?
   c. How might contributions impact the overall quality of the course discussion?

2. What happens when students complete weekly text connections attached to required readings and are then asked to use their text connections in weekly course discussions?
   a. How do students incorporate their text connections into weekly discussions?
   b. How do students use their text connections as a way to contribute to class discussion?

The notion of participation in the university classroom is not new; however, this study examines whether it is better for students to take on roles of contribution. Gioia (1987) differentiates between the two in the classroom context. He acknowledges that when students participate they are involved and included. However, while students who participate “take part,” Gioia argues that student contribution entails deeper social and “intellectual involvement, [the] sharing of knowledge and knowledge construction...and the willful intent to assist others in
the forging of understanding” (pg. 16). Students who contribute further their own learning and the learning of their peers and instructor.

Gioia suggests certain student contribution roles:

- Summarizing
- Offering observations connected to course content
- Sharing personal connections and/or examples
- Asking questions leading to further thinking and discussion
- Playing the devil’s advocate
- Respectfully disagreeing with the instructor, content, or peer in a way that fosters further discussion of concepts or ideas

Within the confines of the class in which the pilot study takes place, the instructor will introduce Gioia’s (1987) contribution roles and foster discussion sessions where students will be asked to “take on” specific roles as they comment and discuss course content. This study adds to the current research in that it specifically investigates the use of these contribution roles and how student discussion changes over time when contribution roles are incorporated into the course context. Current research literature discussing participation or contribution often focuses on how to grade student participation (Gilson, 1994; Mainkar, 2008; Pepper & Pathak, 2008). The focus of this study rather is how discussions shift over time when contribution roles are deliberately taught and incorporated into class discussion. It is beneficial to build a classroom community where learning is the goal and students value their own contributions as well as the contributions of others. By valuing contribution over participation, this study will examine how to foster a studious atmosphere in university classes and enhance student learning.

The college classroom is characterized by reliance upon learning the student does outside the classroom. Readings and assignments are assigned that augment and complement the time spent in the classroom together. The students are expected to engage with those texts and experiences and bring their perspectives to the whole class and class discussions. Within the course where the pilot study takes place, the instructor adapted comprehension strategies articulated by Keene and Zimmerman (1997, 2007). As a feature of the course, students are asked to create text connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world) as they read the weekly assigned readings. The students are free to organize their thoughts, questions, ideas, concerns, connections to life experiences or learning in other courses however is best for them. Over the course of the semester, students will share their text connections in small groups and with the class. They will see how others are organizing their learning and may adapt their own text connections. As a requirement of the course, students must bring their text connections to class and incorporate their thinking and learning based on their text connections into class activities and discussions. A focus of this study is to collect and analyze student text connections over the course of the semester. In addition, the study will examine how students use these text connections as the basis of their contributions to class discussions.
Overall, the goal of this pilot study is to begin to gather data pertaining to the use of text connections and contributions in an undergraduate university course setting. The results from this pilot study will be used to support an even larger study on these instructional practices and their related student and instructor outcomes.

**Study Methodology:**

This pilot study is an investigation of the instructors’ practice which will take place during the fall 2013 University of Michigan-Flint semester within the context of ECE 200: Child Development and Learning. All students registered for the course (currently there are 30 students registered for ECE 200: Child Development and Learning) will be asked to participate in the study. There are no age restrictions or gender restrictions for subjects. With the nature of the student body of the University of Michigan-Flint, it is possible that there will be a considerable age range within the subjects. The principle investigator for the study is also the instructor of the course.

In the second week of the course, the principle investigator will briefly explain the goals of the study to all students. Students will be informed that a goal for the study is to examine how specific instructional strategies might impact student discussions and learning. The instructor will stress that this study is an examination of the instructor’s practice and will in no way alter the course content or objectives. All aspects of the course that will be analyzed will be those that would occur typically in the course. The principle investigator will stress that the research is voluntary and will in no way impact instructor-student interactions or grading. To further protect students, a designated individual not affiliated with the study or the course will be asked to come to the class session where the consent forms will be distributed. The principle investigator will leave the room and this person will distribute the consent forms. All consent forms will be collected by the designated neutral individual and kept in a sealed envelope until the semester is complete and grades are turned in. This will provide students with additional assurance that participation (or a lack of participation) in the pilot study will in no way impact grading.

Throughout the semester, specific instructional strategies will be used as a part of the course. All students (regardless of whether they are participating in the study or not) will take part in the instruction. Below are descriptions of the portions of the course that will be a focus of this pilot study:

- **Learning goals:** At the beginning of the semester, all students will be asked to define themselves as learners in writing and set a learning goal(s) for themselves. This will take place before any instruction takes place. In the middle of the semester (mid to late October) students will reflect upon their learning goals set at the beginning of the semester and will have the opportunity to rework their goals if they would like. This will take place after students are introduced to the contribution roles (Gioia, 1987) and have had the opportunity to use these roles within course
discussions. In addition, students will be completing weekly text connections and incorporating them into the course discussions. Finally, at the end of the semester, students will again revisit their learning goals and write about if/how their learning shifted across the semester. The instructor will collect all of the aforementioned written work; however, only the work of those students consenting to be part of the study will be analyzed. A focus of the study is to examine how the use of contribution roles and text connections by the students might impact student interactions or learning in the course. These units of analysis may shed light on this aspect of the course. Samples of the learning goals assignments are attached within this application in the section for tests, surveys, or interview documents.

- Contributions and audio recordings: Shortly after the start of the semester, the instructor will introduce Gioia’s (1987) contribution roles and foster discussion sessions where students will be asked to “take on” specific roles as they comment and discuss course content. The instructor will model the use of particular contribution roles and will ask that students take on these roles themselves. A requirement of the course is that students take part in course discussions in some way. This could be in whole group discussions or small group discussions. For those students who do not feel comfortable speaking in front of others, they will be asked to begin by sharing one-on-one with students and the instructor. However, over the course of the semester all students are required to take part in whole group discussions. In an effort to capture a sample of these discussions, three course sessions will be audio recorded (once at the beginning of the semester, once at the end of October, and once in late November or early December). The purpose of these audio recordings is to examine how class discussions might change once students begin to contribute vs. participate in a course context as well as to analyze how students incorporate their text connections into course discussions. To identify the speaker on the audio recordings for transcription purposes, students will be asked to say their name before they make a comment. The principle investigator is in the process of securing a UROP student who will also help in the data collection process. The UROP student will attend class and keep track of the students who are talking and the comments they are making. Following the class, the audio recordings will be transcribed immediately in an effort to accurately identify who is speaking and what the students are saying. Using internal research start up funds, the principle investigator will hire a transcriptionist who will be in charge of transcribing the audio recordings. To protect student privacy in transcription and data analysis, each student will be assigned an identification number. All numerical id’s and student names will be kept separately from the actual transcribed audio sessions. Students will be informed that three class sessions will be audio recorded in the informed consent process at the beginning of the semester. The students will also be made aware at the beginning of the classes where audio recording will take place.

- Text Connections: Each week, in conjunction to course readings, students are required to create text connections. The notion of text connections was adapted
from the comprehension strategy work of Keene and Zimmermann (1997, 2007) where students are asked to organize their thoughts and learning associated to course readings through note taking, mapping, charting, journaling, etc. The connections should help the students engage in class discussions and be a good source for a quick review when needed. Students will be informed at the beginning of the course within the syllabus that they will be handing in their text connections each week as well as using their text connections to contribute in class discussions. Students are free to organize their text connections however they see best. These text connections will be used as a unit of analysis by the principle investigator in an effort to see how students organize and connect their reading to their learning over the course of a semester. In addition, the study will examine the use of text connections as contributions within class discussions. As a part of the course in general, students are asked to say whether they are using a text connection when making a statement during a class discussion. This is an instructional move to cue other students when an individual is making a connection between their thinking and the text. In addition, it is a way for the instructor (and the UROP student) to keep track of when students use text connections in their discussions. Only the text connections from study participants will be used as a unit of analysis, however as a requirement of the class the instructor will collect text connections from all students. In addition, only comments from students who agree to participate in the study will be used in analysis of the audio recordings.

• Weekly tally of student contributions: A broad unit of analysis for the pilot study is to track the overall participation vs. contribution of the class members throughout the semester. This not only is an aspect of the study but also a requirement of the course. All students must take part in class discussions. To keep track of student participation/contribution, the UROP student will attend each class and will track discussion participants and comments. Tracking of discussion participants will be comprised of a basic tally system where a check will be made next to a student's name when he or she makes a comment. The UROP student will also write brief notes pertaining to the comment made by the student. The principle investigator will train the UROP student on the contribution roles. If possible, the UROP student will also make note of the participation or contribution role. By keeping track of the weekly class discussion participants and the level of contribution it may be possible to examine how discussions may shift over the course of a semester. The students in the course will be made aware that the UROP student is tracking their comments in order to keep track of who is commenting in discussions and when they do so.

• Analyzing student assignments: All assignments for those students participating in the study will be analyzed for connections between contributions and text connections.
References:


