



The JMC introductory classroom with and without Miley Cyrus: An experiment in undergraduate media research

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Abstract

In the crowded syllabus of the introductory undergraduate course in journalism and mass communication, media research often receives little attention, although it is one of the 12 ACEJMC core values. To investigate one method for injecting into the curriculum a greater understanding and appreciation of research, a comparative study was made between students ($N = 48$) in two sections of an introductory course in the JMC department of a small Southwestern university. Students in the section that learned about media research primarily in relation to a class topic of their choosing exhibited slightly more positive attitudes than students in the section whose study of media research was not related to a self-selected topic, but rather received standard lectures and textbook readings. Although these differences failed to meet the level of significance ($p < .05$), students in the section that selected actress Miley Cyrus as its research topic were found to be more intellectually stimulated by the class, more interested in the field of media-related research, more confident to conduct research, and more likely to enter a research festival. However, students in this section also received slightly lower grades on multiple-choice exam questions about research than students in the other section.

After a long professional journalism career, this author's teaching career began with a broad overview class intended mostly for journalism and mass communication majors, named Media Issues, which was undertaken armed with a copy of John Vivian's *The Media of Mass Communication*, the predecessor's syllabus, and a few PowerPoint presentations featuring multiple ornamental fonts. After several semesters, that textbook was exchanged for Charles Sterin's *Mass Media Revolution*, but the course remained the same time-honored mix of lectures, readings, quizzes, and exams. The current study represents one of several attempts to bring more to the classroom by introduc-

ing the students to mass media research using a topic of their own selection.

The 2014-2015 school year began by allowing the JMC introductory class to select a media-related topic from which teacher and students could together produce an academic paper worthy of publication or presentation. On the first day of class, the teacher provided a quick explanation of Diction language software and how it was used in a specific research project to analyze differences in the tone of various blog posts during the 2012 election cycle (Mendenhall, 2014). The students were told to think of any context in which a large body of mass-media mes-

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sages could be broken into two or more sectors and compared. They quickly offered eight topics with academic potential, ranging from feminism to professional sports, but when it came to an actual vote, the clear winner was Ferguson, Missouri, where protests were still making headlines after the recent shooting of an unarmed black man. Throughout the semester, students contributed to a literature review highlighting racial differences in media messages, collected data from the Internet that was then organized and prepped for Diction's computations with the help of a paid student aide who was also a member of the class, then helped decipher the meaning of the Diction quantitative analysis. The resulting paper, "Blogging Ferguson in Black and White," examined specific differences in tone between white and black authors who commented on events in Ferguson. It was accepted for presentation at the 2015 AEJMC Conference and published in an appropriate journal (Mendenhall, 2015). The next semester, following the same protocol, students voted on a research topic just before the Super Bowl was played, which eventually led to a paper published as commentary in a sports-focused journal (Mendenhall, 2016).

In both instances, students seemed to enjoy the self-determination and the hands-on aspects of these research projects, and in the fall semester of 2015, an opportunity presented itself to test whether this translated into a quantifiable difference in their attitude and learning outcomes.

Literature review

The lectures and quizzes commonly found in the traditional introductory course of a journalism and mass communication curriculum pull only from the bottom two shelves of the six-tier revised pyramid of Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives (Forehand, 2005). Bloom's hierarchy begins with remembering and understanding, but that's as high as expectations go in the typical JMC introductory course. The increased interactivity of Bloom's upper four layers—applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Forehand, p. 2)—are left for later undergraduate courses, or perhaps even for graduate-level students. That's what a recent survey-based analysis reveals about the content and methods used in JMC undergraduate introductory courses (Ashley, 2015). That AEJMC-based study found that while many instructors of JMC introductory courses said they attempted to use interactive methods of teaching, less than a fourth actually

employed group projects or presentations.

This JMC survey made no mention of undergraduate students actually engaging in media research, yet a growing stream of literature suggests that the use of research activities in classes at the undergraduate level can be a useful and innovative way to improve higher education in the United States (Boyer, 1998). In fact, student engagement is widely considered one of the better predictors of student learning and success, with first-year students and those entering the university with the weakest SAT scores benefitting the most (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). This explains why many academic disciplines are attempting to give undergraduate students hands-on research experiences within the curriculum. For example, in one introductory-level course, the formation of self-guided research teams using contemporary multimedia tools to investigate a topic selected from a broad menu was seen to sharply increase critical-thinking skills (Artello, 2014). Also, the semester-long introduction of research activities in an undergraduate business class was described as leading to a change in the instructor's role from lecturer to mentor, and a change in the students' role from passive to active learners (Griesemer, 2011). In Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) courses, the use of research at the undergraduate level was shown to have the greatest benefits to students in their skills, in getting them to think and work like a scientist, and in their personal professional pursuits (Laursen, Seymour, & Hunter, 2012). Another STEM study showed a positive correlation between undergraduate research and mastery of the skills needed for success in graduate school (Gilmore, Vieyra, Timmerman, Feldon & Maher, 2015). In disciplines where research is not even an obvious skill desirable in the workplace, such as management, engaging in the process of conducting research was still shown to raise student awareness of its importance (Coronado, 2011). Such engagement matters in how research is taught, because "students do not like learning about research methodology and fail to see the reasons why they should do so" (Brew, 2007, p. 74). Furthermore, in a shifting world in which technology allows students to be producers of knowledge rather than simply consumers of it, undergraduates "must have opportunities to excel in research and inquiry at earlier stages of their learning experience" (Ozay, 2012, p. 462). With educators learning from these and other studies, undergraduate research has been emphasized in many varied aca-

demographic settings, typified perhaps by a program at the University of Saskatchewan that involved 30 faculty members and several dozen undergraduate students in social science research projects outside of the classroom, with the neophyte students handling data collection, data analysis, and writing (Berdahl, 2014). The payoff? “While classroom-based inquiry may not generate knowledge new to the field, students benefit powerfully from constructing knowledge that is new to them, using approaches authentic to their disciplines” (Laursen, Seymour, & Hunter, 2014, p. 37). However, one study cautioned that not all undergraduate students equally share the benefits of engaging in research, with high-GPA students reaping most of the benefits (Taraban & Logue, 2012).

Meanwhile, introductory JMC courses, according to the Ashley survey, are less involved in this trend toward research, although as a whole many JMC programs are filled with courses that teach hands-on skills (Ashley, 2015). Some JMC examples can be found within the literature regarding undergraduate research as an educational tool, such as a JMC writing mechanics course found to result in increased student satisfaction and learning outcomes when it was moved online with more interactive tools (Poniatowski, 2012). Or the introduction of team-based learning—which allows small groups of students to practice and apply their skills—into an undergraduate mass communication theory course, with the result that team members were able to more correctly answer knowledge-based questions than individual students who had not participated in a team (Han & Newell, 2014). A broader illustration of the lack of emphasis on research in JMC classrooms is a study that measured how JMC alumni rank the 11 Professional Values and Competencies of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication; it found that “research methods” placed seventh for how well the participants’ department taught each competency—and next to last on a listing of their favorite competency, ahead of only math skills (Fuse & Lambiase, 2012).

This literature suggests that JMC introductory courses are not breeding grounds for the appreciation of media research, and the current study was devised in an attempt to see if a different approach to teaching beginning students about research might lead to more appreciation of this aspect of the disciplines of journalism and mass communication. Therefore, this raises the following three research questions within the

parameters of the present study:

RQ1: Does teaching media research by relating it to a research topic of the class’s choosing result in greater knowledge of media research?

RQ2: Does teaching media research by relating it to a research topic of the class’s choosing result in greater appreciation of media research?

RQ3: Does teaching media research by relating it to a research topic of the class’s choosing result in greater overall appreciation of the class?

Methodology

Two sections of the Media Issues course were taught that semester in back-to-back morning sessions. Each included 24 students, split almost evenly between JMC majors and those from other disciplines, with similar age and gender distributions. Preparations were made to teach these two classes as identically as possible, using the same syllabus, textbook, PowerPoint lectures, exams, and other elements. However, from the first day of class their exposure to media research diverged. Section A received a lecture introducing the importance of media research, illustrated with the earlier dissertation work and the Ferguson study using Diction. Section B heard this in abbreviated form, but then discussed possible topics for a research project of their own involving different tones within segments of a mass audience. The students of Section B voted later that week among eight possible topics. The clear winner was the actress/singer Miley Cyrus, who at the time was causing a media stir because of a raucous performance on live television. For the remainder of the semester, Section A received several lectures related to research with a variety of examples, while Section B heard Miley Cyrus cited as a frequent example within those lectures. In Section A, no mention was made of Cyrus, nor throughout the semester did any student indicate knowledge of the Section B project.

During the fourth week of the semester, an assignment was made in both sections for students to write a one-page brief summarizing a recent quantitative study of their choice from a media-related academic journal. However, students in Section A were given wide latitude in the topic of this brief, while students in Section B were instructed to seek a study that would potentially interact with the analysis of discussions of Miley Cyrus on social media. Many of the briefs written by students in Section B resulted

in usable literature review citations. Six weeks into the semester, students in Section B were divided into teams of three and given specific instructions for collecting Internet blog comments made about one of three Miley Cyrus performances on live television in 2009, 2013, and 2015. To minimize dead ends and overlap, the teams worked from a list of 75 blog posts that was created by the instructor. By 10 weeks into the semester, all groups had successfully completed their data-collection assignments, making it possible to run a standard analysis using Diction 7.0 software, which provides quantitative measurements of 40 specific aspects of the tone of a written message, and to uncover significant differences using SPSS. In the final week of the semester, both sections heard a lecture and PowerPoint presentation explaining the premise and results of the Miley Cyrus investigation. In Section A, this was the first time that students had heard about the project, which was vaguely described as “recent results of a study conducted by another class on campus;” no Section A student asked for further explanation. Students in Sections A and B were assigned to write an essay listing what they saw as the most significant findings of the data analysis and explaining what societal or media factors could have contributed to those differences in how the blogosphere talked about Miley Cyrus in 2009, 2013, and 2015.

The Section B study was completed as *My Oh Miley Cyrus: Analyzing online comments from TV performances in 2009, 2013, and 2015*. This paper was presented at the 2016 AEJMC Midwinter Conference at the University of Oklahoma. The moderator of that presentation commented that it was fully ready for publication.

Results

As a result of this experiment in teaching methods using the two sections of Media Issues, no significant difference could be seen among variables that could be used to compare actual learning outcomes. The results of Independent Samples *t* Tests used to compare the two sections are summarized in Table 1. None of the 11 comparisons was shown to be statistically significant at $p \leq .05$, which suggests that selecting and conducting the Miley Cyrus study had only slight effects on the students of Section B. However, the four variables that came closest to a significant difference arose from five attitudinal questions asked on an anonymous survey completed by all students at the end of the semester. On those questions, students

in Section B indicated that:

- They were more intellectually stimulated by the class.
- They viewed scholarly, media-related research as a more interesting field.
- They felt confident to conduct such research themselves.
- And, they were more likely to enter their university’s Undergraduate Research Festival.

Again, none of these variables demonstrated significant difference between the two sections at the level of $p \leq .05$, but this weak trend toward attitudinal change does stand in contrast to the nearly identical grades and other performance-based variables.

Another interesting, but not significant, outcome is seen by merging the two sections and comparing JMC majors with students from across all other majors. The JMC majors—who as a group were younger than the non-majors taking the course as a social science elective—scored six points lower on the Miley Cyrus essay and nearly three points lower on both the final exam and the overall semester grade. Perhaps this can be viewed as a mild warning against expecting high-level research from undergraduates just beginning their college careers, even if they may have the advantage of greater interest in the subject matter.

Discussion

Consistent with a broad body of literature, this small study appears to indicate that students who are exposed to teaching methods that are more interactive than traditional lectures, and who are allowed some latitude to direct their own studies, become slightly more engaged. At slightly less than the level of significance, the students in Section B said the class was more challenging and that research was a more interesting pursuit that they would be more likely to engage in again. They wrote slightly longer essays about research and received slightly higher marks, but they did not earn better overall grades for the course. In fact, as variable No. 9 indicates, despite their small advantage in overall scores on the final exam, they actually exhibited slightly less of an actual grasp of the foundational topic. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that on a multiple-choice exam administered soon after a lecture about media research, students who had no hands-on experience with conducting research were more focused on the dry history and facts of media research than on the actual practice of it. That is, while Section A strengthened

its ability to remember, Section B moved higher on Bloom's pyramid of learning outcomes, trying out new abilities without worrying so much about the foundation. At any rate, because these weak differences were found in small groups and do not meet the accepted level of statistical significance, the results are

not generalizable beyond this experiment.

After four iterations of this project, a few lessons have emerged for other instructors of a JMC introductory course:

- Telling students that they can research *anything* has always resulted in a topic that is currently salient

Table 1: T-tests comparing two sections of the same course

Students in fall 2015 received different forms of instruction about media-based research, with **Section A** selecting and participating in an academic study of blog comments about singer Miley Cyrus following her three major television appearances on award shows. **Section B** received standard lectures with no self-selection or hands-on involvement in a research project. (N = 48)

Variable	Section A Mean	Section A SD	Section B Mean	Section B SD	T	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)
1. Instructor stimulated students to intellectual effort beyond that required by most courses.	4.19	1.03	4.43	.68	.885	40	.381
2. As a result of taking this course, I have more positive feelings toward this field of study.	4.29	.72	4.24	1.00	-.178	40	.860
3. Course made scholarly, media-related research a more interesting field to me.	4.19	.81	4.38	.59	.869	40	.390
4. Course made me feel more competent to conduct scholarly, media-related research.	4.00	.77	4.29	.72	1.240	40	.222
5. Course made me more likely to enter a project in ACU's Undergraduate Research Festival.	2.9	1.30	3.43	1.08	1.422	40	.163
6. Score on essay explaining the Miley Cyrus results.	86.9	12.83	87.3	11.36	-.110	45	.913
7. "Excellent" marks on essay in 10 categories used for departmental writing assessment.	48	NA	57	NA	NA	NA	NA
8. Words written on the essay (750 was suggested length).	912	191.93	933	281.90	-.297	44	.768
9. Percentage of 10 research-related questions correctly answered on final exam.	84.2	13.81	79.6	16.09	1.054	45	.298
10. Overall score on final exam.	86.2	8.28	87.1	6.66	-.401	45	.691
11. Semester grade for the course.	88.84	7.77	88.86	7.02	-.009	45	.993

*IDEA: Anonymous online evaluation completed by students using the Individual Development and Assessment tool.

on social media. While more serious, studious topics have been suggested, whatever is being tweeted and Instagrammed has the best chance of winning a majority of votes. If this is a frightening prospect, it would be simple enough to limit the scope of *anything*, although that appears to be part of the allure of the project.

- Ensuring that one of these projects can be wrapped up by the end of the semester means that while the instructor may have preached early on about the wide world of media studies, he then steered the students toward a methodology with which he was already familiar. The choice for the current study, the Diction software, is versatile, easy to use and allows a quick turnaround with straightforward import into SPSS. This allows for reaching the important phase of letting students grapple with the meaning of the data before the semester break erases it from their minds.

- Differentiating between academic sources and such sources as *People* magazine does not appear to be easy for undergraduate students, particularly in the first two years. It appears to baffle them. It was judged as valuable to assign students to ferret out material for a well-developed literature review, but even with specific directions and limitations the author still received some inappropriate articles.

- Participating in a project that may be presented or published in the greater academic community appears to be a more valuable experience from the students' point of view than a typical in-class research paper. While publication guidelines generally do not allow individual credit to each participating student, official recognition can be given to classes participating in these projects. As an example, the Ferguson study cited above, which was the first of these student-directed projects, was published with the following author's note: "Suggesting this study and assisting with its data collection were 47 undergraduate students enrolled in Media Issues, the introductory course within the ACU Department of Journalism and Mass Communication. They were supervised by Jessica Clark" (Mendenhall, 2015).

Another important aspect of this project is the amount of time, resources, and emphasis that can be placed on engaging in research without shortchanging the many other elements of an introductory course. The aim in the present study has been to minimize the actual classroom time spent on this undertaking, but perhaps in doing so it has failed to reach its potential as a valuable tool for engaging students.

The author is still allowing Media Issues students to select their own topic for publishable academic research. During the spring semester of 2016, they settled on Caitlin Jenner's *Vanity Fair* cover, resulting in a project titled *Unveiling Caitlyn Jenner: A quantitative comparison of comments from celebrity, religious, and political sites*. In the fall semester of 2016, another class voted to investigate the social media friction between the Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter campaigns, resulting in a paper selected for presentation by the Minorities in Communication Division at the 2017 AEJMC conference.

With their strong ties to journalism, objective and cynical JMC instructors try not to be blinded by the light of a single instructional method, lest it leads to overlooking other important elements of effective teaching. The information in Table 1 (previous page), as an example, seems to say that Section A gained more out of the standard lectures than the students enthused by Miley Cyrus; however, this instructor considers it valuable to see the light go on in students' eyes when they realize that legitimate media research is often accessible and interesting, both in the pursuit and the finished product.

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