

BRICK & CLICK

Using Web-based interactive learning to supplement Associated Press style instruction in a traditional seated classroom

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the use of integrated, interactive, Web-based instruction within a traditional "seated" classroom has become an increasingly significant part of the learning process for mass communications students. This study examines the rationale for using interactive instruction to teach Associated Press style within a public relations writing course. Examination of evaluation results taken over two semesters indicates the integration of the Web-based instruction and assessment was positively accepted. Students also rated their ability to achieve the grade they expected in class (both in its traditional format and with the interactive component) as high.

INTRODUCTION

This study describes using Internet-based Associated Press style instruction with traditional seated-classroom instruction to teach a sophomore-level public relations writing course. It subsequently examines student attitudes toward combined online and seated instruction and evaluates the effectiveness of the approach in supplementing communications education.

Undergraduate education among communications students often focuses on skills training, including AP style. Mastery of language, through coursework in writing and production, was set forth by the Public Relations Society of America's Commission on Public Relations Education as one of many interdisciplinary skills necessary for success in the profession (PRSA, 1999). While PR practice as a career enjoys a certain amount of popularity, there is professional concern regarding the breadth and depth of adequately trained individuals to meet the demands of PR services and counsel (PRSA, 1999). Among 24 skills needed for entry-level employment in PR, practitioners agreed that the most desired skill was writing ability. The same practitioners also noted that they were not satisfied that these skills were found in graduates (PRSA, 1999). Enrollment growth within PR curricula is negatively impacting classroom space, instructional materials, departmental budgets, and faculty workloads as communications academics are forced to "do more with less." (Pullen, 2005). This article explores using Internet-based instruction, in addition to seated instruction, as a feasible route to providing efficacious training in AP style.

Use of the Internet and other educational technologies has successfully supplemented the traditional-seated-classroom format of instruction. In a broad context, both information transfer and successful cognitive learning can be achieved faster, cheaper and more effectively through the use of the Internet, course management software and digital media (Draves, 2000). E-learning experts argue that the more instructors involve students in online learning, the greater level of success students will achieve (Palloff & Pratt, 2000).

Approximately 79% of all college students agree that Internet use has positively impacted their academic experiences (Jones, 2002). Internet-based education (e-learning), is defined as "any form of organized learning that is carried out using digital media" (Christie & Ferdos, 2001). E-learning is still being established as an effective form of pedagogy, and educators are slowly gaining comfort in its use (Sutherland & Stewart, 1999). Scholars of e-learning have noted that traditional communications courses use the Internet and its technologies to supplement instruction, communication, and to deliver distance education (Royal, 2005; Baker, 1999).

Christine and Ferdos (1999) noted in their overview of educational technologies that the traditional university pedagogical model was characterized by lectures, laboratory work, and tutorials, with an "implicit assumption that students had to sink or swim." Jones (2002) iterated in his overview of college students and their use of the Internet in the Pew Internet and American Life Project that use of e-learning technology should be used to supplement academic activities. Jones also states "it may be difficult to convince [students] to abandon the traditional setting after they have had the kinds of attention afforded them in the college classroom" (2002). More specifically, Hesster (1999) investigated the effectiveness of using a Web-based interactive test as a valuable educational tool within a communications theories course. Overall response to the test was positive, and indicated that the interactive nature was a useful tool for studying course content. Hesster measured perceived value and ease, and enjoyment of use. Students strongly agreed with

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statements loaded on perceived value. Those taking the interactive online test, according to Hester, scored average four points higher than those students not taking the online version.

Development of this new “brick and click” pedagogy, also called hybrid or blended learning (Palm & Caris, 2005), allows students a varied experience, dependent upon mutual quality investment by both the teacher and student (Christie & Ferdos, 2001). Using the Internet to deliver skills education provides an active, independent, flexible, meaningful, and authentic learning experience that is interactive (Baker, 1999; Lejeune & Richardson, 1998). According to Draves (2000), the learning process online is instinctually cognitive. Draves argues that online results are outcome-oriented and can be achieved faster, cheaper and better than in traditional seated classes. He suggests that the online learner is not present to learn a process, but to learn knowledge skills. The learner can focus on specific content areas, working at his or her own speed. Furthermore, the learning environment becomes less institutionally based or instructor-centered in the online environment (Baker, 1999). Despite clear benefits of online learning, Jones (2002) noted in “The Internet Goes to College” that there appears to be very little interest among college students to completely abandon seated classes for a purely online educational experience.

The challenge of e-learning lies mostly with the instructor. In previous studies on using the Internet to teach communications skills, it has been noted that students regularly report relatively little difficulty in adapting to the technological skills necessary for participation in their courses (Blake, 2000; Royal, 2005). Faculty creating e-learning experiences as supplements to seated classes found a major increase in workload (at least at the beginning) in comparison with traditional teaching formats not utilizing e-learning (Reis, Stavitsky, Gleason & Ryan, 2000).

METHOD

Case studies have been defined as investigation into a “specific, bounded system,” (Stake, 1994) a method of learning about complex instances, or even the description of phenomena within a real-life context (Yin, 1989). For examination of the e-learning tactics for supplemental instruction, the primary method in this analysis is the single-case, instrumental case study (Stake, 1994). However, case study research can suffer from issues of subjectivity and ethics (Becker, et al, 2005). The longitudinal approach of the current case study adds to its validity; data were collected through two consecutive semesters. Student evaluations, commentary, and performance results were examined.

THE CASE

The PR writing curriculum used in the mass communications school of a large Midwestern university, in which this study was based, was designed to utilize both the traditional classroom setting and a web-based, proprietary instructional system. The system was a web-based course management system much like Blackboard or WebCT. This “brick and click” approach allowed for in-classroom instruction to focus on the production of written products. Concurrently, students received online instruction and evaluation in AP style through a series of eight online thematic presentations and quizzes.

The online thematic presentations were added to the PR writing courses in fall 2004. The focus of the course is to teach students to effectively write and produce a variety of PR written tools, including news releases, fact sheets, backgrounders, feature articles, persuasive request letters, newsletters, brochures and the like. The course was taught each fall and spring semester in a computer lab in which up to 20 Macintosh computers were available. Class sizes were typically 15-18 students per section.

Each presentation, of no more than 25 slides, was created using Microsoft PowerPoint and provided an overview of an AP style theme. Themes included (1) capitalization, (2) addresses, (3) abbreviations, (4) dates, (5) time, (6) datelines, (7) numerals, (8) people, punctuation, and quotations. The presentations were checked for accuracy by two educators in the university’s PR sequence and graduate student assistants. “Mini-quiz” slides within each presentation briefly tested the students before they proceeded to the actual quiz for that area. A slide summarizing the material was presented at the conclusion of the presentation.

Accompanying each presentation was a quiz pool of 50 questions matching the thematic material, and each quiz asked 25 randomly selected, multiple-choice questions. The quiz questions offered multiple-choice answers. Quizzes did not exceed 10 % of the course grade. As students progressed from one thematic area to another, the quizzes became comprehensive.

Each semester, students were asked for their input. Students were queried about their experiences with the AP style presentations and quizzes through a confidential online survey system. Students were asked to rate the usefulness of the AP units, the level of new information learned, and if the AP units should be continued the following semester. A Likert scale from one to five was utilized, with one representing “strongly disagree” and five representing “strongly agree.” Data was collected for the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study questioned student perception of online instruction of AP style with in a traditional seated class. Specific research questions addressed:

1: How would students value e-learning as a way to enforce AP style rules already known?

2: How would students value e-learning as a way to present new information?

3: Would students recommend retaining the online components in subsequent semesters?

Student perceptions of workload and ability to achieve desired grades in the course were also assessed.

Capitalization and addresses

- Do not capitalize or abbreviate roadway designations when used alone.
– The road ascends the mountain.
- Do not capitalize or abbreviate roadway designations when used with more than one street name.
– The car sped down Manhattan and Pacific avenues before reaching the beach.

Associated Press Style
Unit Three Addresses
Dr. Joyce C. Gordon

Figure 1.
Example Slide

FINDINGS

The PR writing courses are the only courses using the online tool to teach and reinforce AP style in the university's mass communications school. Although the PR writing classes at the university had a heavy workload and content associated with them, students rarely expressed displeasure regarding the online presentations and quizzes in addition to their other work. Student commentary from mid-semester and end-of-semester course evaluations was brief, but positive. Students indicated that greater feedback from the AP style quizzes and more AP style practice would be desired. They also said that the AP units reinforced the writing skills they learned in the PR writing classes.

Students indicated in mid-semester "check-up" evaluations that they felt the AP style units were useful, should be continued in the following semester, and were providing new information they were not learning in other classes. A total of 41 students took the PR writing courses during these two semesters; 34 completed the survey, resulting in an 82 % response rate. Each of the classes included approximately 17 students. When asked "The AP units have been useful to enforce AP style rules I knew already," 77 % of fall 2004 students (see table 1) indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the question; 82% of spring 2005 students also agreed or strongly agreed (see table 2).

Students were asked to indicate level of agreement with the statement "I have learned new information from the AP style units." Seventy-one percent of the fall 2004 students agreed or strongly agreed; 65% of the spring 2005 students registered those responses. Lastly, students were asked "The AP style units should be continued after this semester." Seventy-seven percent of the fall 2004 students agreed or strongly agreed, while 88% of the spring 2005 responded in-kind.

Student performance and evaluation has remained somewhat consistent since implementation of the online supplemental system. Average performance during the fall 2004 semester was a score of 98.2 points of a possible 120 cumulative points. During the spring 2005 semester, the average score was 94.7 of a possible 120 cumulative points.

CHALLENGES

Utilizing the online environment for the instruction and study of AP style is not without challenges. Pullen (2005) points out that growing enrollment creates demand for writing laboratories, putting equipment under constant use and need for constant upgrades. To engage the AP style units, students utilized Microsoft PowerPoint software. Although many students owned personal computers and had the software at hand, those who did not had to take extra effort such as printing out the presentations and finding open computer labs to take quizzes. Some students indicated problems with software versions and computing platforms.

There is also the challenge of motivation and time management. While students were not timed during their actual quiz, access to each quiz was limited. Quizzes were available on/at a certain date and time, and unavailable likewise, usually within five days. Some students neglected to complete their quizzes prior to the closing date and time and therefore did not gain the points available.

From the instructors' points-of-view, the biggest challenge was in material preparation. Numerous hours were used to create each presentation and quiz pool. Upload of quiz questions was laborious and took numerous steps to produce an evaluation device easily utilized by students. E-learning experts at Adelphi University solidify this challenge issue in their paper, "New Avenues of Teaching at Adelphi: Innovation via Hybrid Learning." Pre-course surveys of instructors utilizing the hybrid learning format indicated an early belief that course preparation would take little or no extra time, while the instructor's post-course survey results diverged, indicating course development had taken greater time and effort than expected (Palm & Caris, 2005). The authors also note challenges utilizing the university's unique proprietary course management software.

Another relevant challenge is the instructor's overall comfort with the online pedagogical structure. The cyberspace classroom, even in supplement to a traditional, seated environment, is not the same. The course materials and approaches that work face-to-face may not work as successfully online.

CONCLUSION

Use of e-learning in communications curricula provides opportunities and benefits for both students and instructors. Since AP style plays an important part of the career success of communications professionals, repetitive instruction and evaluation is key. Presentation of thematic AP style information in a format somewhat controllable by the student allows for more consistent and student-centered successful learning.

The lack of breadth in scholarship into online learning supplementation indicates an area for further exploration. While this study used a convenience sample of 34 students over the span of two semesters, it establishes a starting point for future research, both longitudinally and throughout communications academia. Greater research into enabling student success in a hybrid-learning environment is also relevant to this case study.

5. Click on the correct answers: 0.5

<input type="checkbox"/>	A.	The teacher lived on Grandview Dr.
<input type="checkbox"/>	B.	The teacher lived on Grandview Drive.
<input type="checkbox"/>	C.	The teacher lived on Grandview dr.
<input type="checkbox"/>	D.	The teacher lived on Grandview drive.

Figure 2.
Example Question
for Quiz Pool

Other relevant questions beget further investigation. Two different instructors implemented this system of interactive learning supplements. While both instructors utilized the same teaching format within their respective classes, there is the question of whether each instructor's teaching styles and attitudes toward the interactive portion of the class had any bearing on the students' evaluation. Another consideration would be the informal evaluation tool used by both instructors during each semester. Both the informal mid-semester evaluation and the university-sanctioned end-of-semester evaluation, however, do ask students to evaluate their course experiences based on questions that focus on student outcomes.

Furthermore, the authors note that evaluation of these learning processes should include more variables, such as levels of convenience, interest, and usefulness as compared to other mass communications courses, to strengthen the study's validity. Evaluation should also include a "brick and click" vs. "just brick" study. Lastly, to aid in a more longitudinal approach to this scholarship, the authors believe pre- and post-testing among the students would provide a benchmark in several areas, including prior education and understanding of AP style, their familiarity and comfort with the Internet, and how those issues relate to their ratings for the course.

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Table 1.
Student Ratings of Course
(AP style) – Fall 2004

	AP style units useful in enforcing style rules already known	New information was learned from AP style units	AP style units should be continued in future semesters
Strongly Agree	29.4%	29.4%	47.1%
Agree	52.9%	35.3%	41.2%
Neutral	5.9%	17.7%	5.9%
Disagree	11.8%	17.7%	5.9%
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
N	17	17	17

	AP style units useful in enforcing style rules already known	New information was learned from AP style units	AP style units should be continued in future semesters
Strongly Agree	5.8%	17.6%	11.8%
Agree	70.6%	52.9%	64.7%
Neutral	17.6%	5.8%	11.8%
Disagree	5.8%	23.5%	11.8%
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
N	17	17	17

Table 2.
Student Ratings of Course
(AP style) – Spring 2005