

## WDI Final Report: GGR277

Social Research Methods, Winter 2016

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### ***Writing Instruction Provided:***

The original proposed redesign of GGR277 changed the order of assignments and adjusted the structure of some of the assignments to streamline the process. Throughout the semester, there were supposed to be specific writing-based tutorials on topics ranging from tone and clarity to writing survey questions to reporting on data. During the summer, however, I attended a conference session that inspired me to push the redesign of the GGR277 even further. Students designed and implemented two research projects investigating the following general research question: *Does UTM encourage students to be passive receivers of information who do not reflect critically and creatively on how knowledge is produced and reproduced?* This question, while obviously meant to be provocative, served as a framework for students to practice various research methods, including interviews, surveys, focus groups, and structured observation. Writing instruction in tutorial was thus tailored to each group of students' needs. General feedback for writing issues in class was incorporated into lecture.

### ***Writing Activities:***

The redesign from last year changed the structure of the assignments to provide more student creativity while also providing multiple points of formative feedback. The formative feedback was the most successful aspect of the redesign this year. I worked with the two Teaching Assistants (TAs) to make the tutorials as effective as possible for the students. The TAs, Jessica Carlos and Andrew Fenech, demonstrated huge initiative in designing the tutorials and finding multiple and creative ways of meeting students' needs. They worked together as a team in tutorials and made themselves very accessible to students. Rather than being mini-lectures, tutorials turned into workshop sessions. The TAs have students writing feedback informally in an 'as needed' format. This proved very effective as students were motivated to listen to the lessons provided by the TAs in this format. The writing assignments were based on a series of interactions with the TAs. First, students had to propose a research project. To gain approval, they had to complete a worksheet in which they succinctly described their research design and its rationale. Then they had to design their survey or interview/observation guide. The TAs would give them feedback on their writing at this stage – helping them write clearer and more concise questions. They then had to bring in their data and discuss how to represent the data with the TAs. While they worked in groups of 3-4 to collect their data, the final reports were written individually. TAs gave significant feedback on the reports and turned them around fast enough to ensure they were available to students as they embarked on their second research project. The final assignment was a short abstract for a research proposal. Although there was guidance provided for this assignment, it was not as successful as the other assignments, perhaps because it was not integrated into the main research project assignment.

### *Evaluation of Effectiveness:*

While I do not have any evidence of the effectiveness of specific parts of this process from a student perspective (this is a major oversight on my part and something I would like to address next year), there is very strong evidence that students felt the approach created a positive learning experience. The following comments drawn from the student online survey (SOS) speak to the effectiveness of this relationship. (Note: I've never had TAs discussed so much in an SOS survey.)

The TAs in this course were outstanding, they were very approachable and helpful. They contributed to improve my course experience.

Jessica Carlos and Andrew Fenneck, the TA's for the course were extremely helpful, and answered emails in a timely manor, offering help without complaint

the TAs were helpful and really helped us out

The tutorial is helpful because the TAs are there every week when you need help

Even with the assistance from the TAs i felt like they were looking for more in our research reports. They were very helpful however their office hours were very limiting since they were only during specific tutorial times. However, getting a hold of them through email was easy and allowed me to ask more questions.

Nicole Laliberte and her Teaching Assistants were approachable and willing to go above and beyond what was required of them. I appreciate that they were accessible via email and responded promptly to any questions or concerns that I had.

Tutors were very available. Professor presented the material on very interesting form, involving group discussion.

The TAs Jessica and Andrew were excellent! They knew their stuff well, were extremely helpful for getting help and guidance with the assignments, and were always responsive to emails (the many, many emails haha). They enhanced the quality of my learning in this course, and their efforts are greatly appreciated :)

I had the professor and all the TA help in for me everytime in needed help even in email.

The TAs were excellent and always provided assistance. They went above and beyond

Professor Laliberte and her 2 teaching assistants were available all the time.

The teacher assistants were always available and kind.

TA's were a lot of help answering emails and during lecture tutorials. Nicole was also very helpful to answer questions that were vague and misunderstood.

The T.A.'s were phenomenal in how they were able to help to clarify and guide myself and my group members through the assignments. I was impressed! They created such a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom.

The student feedback on the assignments in other parts of the SOS was not as clear. Compare, for example, the SOS averages for questions 4 and 5 from this year (first set) and last year (second set).

Scale: 1 - Not At All 2 - Somewhat 3 - Moderately 4 - Mostly 5 - A Great Deal

Question	Summary	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
I found the course intellectually stimulating.	3.5	0.9
The course provided me with a deeper understanding of the subject matter.	3.8	0.9
The instructor ( <a href="#">Nicole Laliberte</a> ) created an atmosphere that was conducive to my learning.	4.3	1.0
Course projects, assignments, tests, and/or exams improved my understanding of the course material.	3.7	1.0
Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams provided opportunity for me to demonstrate an understanding of the course material.	3.9	0.9
<b>Institutional Composite Mean</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>1.0</b>

Scale: 1 - Not At All 2 - Somewhat 3 - Moderately 4 - Mostly 5 - A Great Deal

Question	Summary	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
I found the course intellectually stimulating.	3.8	1.1
The course provided me with a deeper understanding of the subject matter.	4.0	1.0
The instructor ( <a href="#">Nicole Laliberte</a> ) created an atmosphere that was conducive to my learning.	4.4	1.0
Course projects, assignments, tests, and/or exams improved my understanding of the course material.	4.0	1.1
Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams provided opportunity for me to demonstrate an understanding of the course material.	4.1	1.0
<b>Institutional Composite Mean</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>1.0</b>

Last year's responses to the question of how the course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams contributed to the learning experiences were slightly higher than this year's. (Note: participation in the SOS was around 70% both years). This information is a bit confusion on a number of levels. First, this is a double-barreled (or, actually quadruple-barreled) question that lumps together assignments and tests so it is unclear what is being commented on. Second, this year I worked with the TAs to make sure the assignments and exams were much more connected to lecture material. More research needs to be done to understand the disconnect indicated by the above numbers.

In the qualitative feedback from students, there were many comments connecting the assignments to the lecture format and material.

Instruction in this course was really good. It was interesting because the main research question that was the focus of our assignments was reflected and exemplified in the course itself (so clever!). The assignments revolved around the idea of passive and active learning, and Dr. Laliberte made great efforts to encourage active learning amongst the students through the design of her lectures and the course itself. She was always very enthusiastic and encouraged participation in class. I barely took notes, but somehow always remembered what I learned.

instruction for this course was clear and concise, provided great detail on what was expected for each assignment. With each assignment, feedback was given, this allowed to interpret the feedback and include it in other assignments content of the course was fairly reciprocated, with lots of examples and discussions during class time

There were not any specific complaints about the assignments, except for one student complaining about inconsistency in the marking.

In regards to assignment marks, I would have expected to see an increase in mark from the first to second research project. This was barely the case – the average went up by 1.5% points. More research needs to be done to establish if this is due to raising expectations on the part of the markers or if students are really not improving with the writing instruction and feedback being given them.

### **Future Directions:**

I have worked with my TAs from this year to redesign the assignments and tutorials for next year. The proposed re-design of GGR277 will require a more iterative writing process and adjust the structure of tutorials to allow for more formative feedback earlier in the process. Rather than two distinct research projects, students will practice writing both interview and survey questions earlier in the semester and then choose to conduct one of these two research methods based on their area of interest and the strength of their questions. During the initial phase of question

writing, students will workshop their questions in some groups during tutorial with formative feedback from their TAs. They will then be expected to 'pilot' the questions within the class. The assignment to be assessed will be the original questions followed by revisions based on feedback during their pilot studies. The importance of this type of editing during writing will be reinforced during the main research phase when students will be required to turn in drafts of a methods section, results section, and a discussion section prior to the final assignment. Finally, I plan to work with the RGASC to design more effective measures to determine the utility of the writing interventions utilized in the class.

My goal for GGR277 continues to be helping students improve their discipline specific writing skills. Learning how to write about the research process, communicating findings, and assessing the ethical ramifications of research are all skills necessary for success in Geography. I look forward to continuing to shape this course's assessments to better meet students' needs and improve their writing skills.