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# Improving Undergraduate Student Engagement in a Hybrid Research Course

Genevieve B. Elrod  
*Grand Valley State University*

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### Improving Undergraduate Student Engagement in a Hybrid Research Course

Undergraduate nursing students have traditionally struggled to appreciate and understand research. Traditional teaching and learning methods in the research classroom are not meeting the needs of current students (McCurry & Martins, 2010), and innovations must be sought to overcome students' resistance to research. Efforts to improve the early research utilization skills and attitudes of students is critical if we are to hope for the grounding of their future practice in evidence.

To engage students in one hybrid research course, the faculty member created an innovative "March Madness" assignment that assists students in applying their learning. This article details how students engage in collaboration and friendly competition to implement critical research appraisal.

#### Method

"March Madness" falls at the same time in the semester as the popular basketball tournament of the same name, and it emulates the tournament's structure and excitement. This assignment spans 3 weeks, integrating both online and in-seat class sessions and occurs only after several learning units on aspects of research design such as validity, frameworks, sampling, and measurement. To prepare for the assignment, faculty selected eight studies on an appealing and relatable topic—reducing test anxiety in nursing students—and created a competition bracket in which students are assigned in pairs to play offense, defense, or referee on particular articles (Strouse, Elrod, & Butler, 2018).

In the first week, students present critiques in small-group discussion boards. The students in offense and defense roles explain the strengths or weaknesses in their articles. Prompts remind them to consider various aspects of the articles (e.g., framework, sample, implications). Referees scan the two articles they are overseeing, read their peers' descriptions of the strengths and weaknesses, and justify which article is stronger.

Next, the students are assigned new roles and articles, and we hold a debate in class where students critique the previous week's "winning" articles. The students in offense and defense roles focus on overall credibility and meaning of the research, and their prompts include ideas relating to validity, rival hypotheses, generalizability, and more. The referees are assigned secret biases to impact their voting, and the class ends with a discussion on the roles of bias in research and in peer review.

The final week involves online journals in which students decide which of the final two articles should be declared the "winner." They also follow prompts to address how they have met the learning outcome for the assignment, and they have the opportunity to seek any additional clarification from faculty.

#### Results

Student reactions to this assignment have been overwhelmingly positive. Thematic analysis of two semesters of journal entries indicates several patterns. Students (a) eagerly emphasize strengths as well as weaknesses in research articles; (b) enjoy all assigned roles equally; (c) place high importance on learned skills and improved confidence in dissecting and appraising research; (d) value the repeated practice and narrowed focus this assignment affords; and (e) gain a critical attitude toward accepting all published research as valid. One student shared the following in a journal entry:

I was able to apply what we have been studying all semester. This was a good way to learn how we find valid research and the process of critical appraisal. Now, I feel more confident when assessing articles, and I was able to tie everything together. It can be hard to understand the assigned readings, but by the end of this assignment I actually understood the content.

Faculty have found this approach valuable in reaching student learning outcomes based on journal entries for this assignment, improvements in the quality of students' final presentations in the course, and feedback on faculty evaluations. Adaptations for this assignment

have included a shift in the order of in-seat and online class sessions, changes in the number of articles used based on class size, and even a name change; thanks to a creative student, the assignment was renamed "Thanksgiving Throwdown" for the fall semesters.

#### Conclusion

The success of this assignment is owed to several factors: students' personal investment in the topic, sustained engagement with the material, overall low stakes, focused instruction, group collaboration, and friendly and fun competition. Baccalaureate nurse educators must focus on using similar innovations to prepare students to embrace and drive evidence-based practice despite the barriers they will face in the practice setting. Research that investigates innovations that build a strong foundation of research appreciation among nursing undergraduates may help change the traditional student resistance to research and support an increase in evidence-based practice among nurses.

#### References

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**Genevieve B. Elrod, PhD, RN, CNE**  
 elrodgen@gvsu.edu  
 Kirkhof College of Nursing,  
 Grand Valley State University

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