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"I Hate History": A Study of Student Engagement in Community College Undergraduate History Courses

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Many instructors seek to improve student engagement, but determining how to achieve student engagement can be complex and complicated. The authors sought to explore how the implementation of active-learning strategies in undergraduate history courses at a metropolitan community college using graphic organizers and group discussion impacted student engagement. Surveys were distributed to students in five undergraduate history courses in order to elicit student perspectives on how active-learning strategies impact engagement. The survey data revealed that some active-learning strategies improved student engagement, whereas others did not. The authors report that a combination of implementing lecture and active-learning strategies was effective in fostering student engagement in their undergraduate history courses.

Introduction

Student engagement is an important factor in optimizing educational outcomes in college teaching. Many instructors seek to improve student engagement; however, determining how to achieve greater student engagement is complex and complicated. Instructors often equate students'

disengagement in class to their disliking the subject; however, issues of engagement may run deeper than this. Investigating student perceptions of instructional strategies is a key component of understanding which pedagogies improve engagement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze how the role of instructor-as-facilitator of active-learning strategies affected student engagement in undergraduate history courses at a metropolitan community college in the Southeast. We explored how the use of graphic organizers—charts to help students organize notes taken in class—facilitates student group discussion that promotes engagement in our undergraduate history courses. The following questions formed the foundation of this research:

1. How do community college students perceive the effectiveness of active-learning strategies on their engagement in undergraduate history courses?
2. How do community college students perceive the effectiveness of their instructor taking the role of instructor-as-facilitator of active-learning strategies on their engagement in undergraduate history courses?

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that students who work in groups and the instructor facilitates active-learning strategies through the use of graphic organizers and group discussion are more likely to be engaged in undergraduate history courses [than?]. Research shows that instructors who provide college students with opportunities to interact with peers and multiple texts make history content relevant to their life experiences and prior knowledge, thus improving engagement. Active-learning strategies also aid in honing skills that are necessary for students to improve engagement and comprehension of historical information. These skills include, but are not limited to, analyzing primary sources, reading and writing comprehension, conducting research, and critical thinking.

Literature Review

What Is Student Engagement?

Engagement is "the key ingredient of learning" and "involves paying attention, listening, concentrating, trying to remember, mentally rehearsing, thinking, and practicing" (Goslin, 2003, pp. 5-17). Mosenthal (1999) states that engagement "is grounded in the cognitive and affective systems of learners and readers" (p. 12). Guthrie and Anderson (1999) note that engagement involves "social interaction patterns in the classroom [which] can amplify or construct students' intrinsic motivations, their use of self-regulated strategies, and their attainment of deep conceptual knowledge" (p. 20). Measuring student engagement not only involves observing specific behaviors, such as raising hands or asking questions, but also how students' beliefs about learning impact educational outcomes (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

Variables That Influence Student Engagement

Several variables influence student engagement. Yair (2000) contends that "alienation from instruction" occurs when external preoccupations, including family obligations, work, or social activities, impact a student's ability to pay attention and be engaged in school (p. 247). Instructor-centered lectures can constitute "non-relevant instruction [that] allows external preoccupations to swamp students' attention" (Yair, 2000, p. 247) because these students "are alienated from the content presented in the majority of textbooks used in . . . colleges" (Loewen, 1996, [1995 in references] p. 12).

According to Certo, Cauley, Moxley, and Chafin (2008), lecture-oriented instructors who emphasize a "right answers-only [approach] without further explanation to support comprehension" (p. 29) can lead to what Dewey (1916) called "ready-made" history courses (p. 209). In "ready-made" history courses, "a large number of statements about things remote and alien to everyday experience are learned" (Dewey, 1916, p. 209). Delivering lectures in history classes [**Let's be consistent: "courses" or "classes"?**] has changed considerably since the Progressive Era, as many instructors give "enhanced lectures" with discussion prompts, video clips, and visuals (Marcketti, 2011, p. 75). However, lectures that lack of relevancy and application of historical knowledge to students' life experiences can lead to rote memorization of information without critical analysis about why historical information is important. Therefore, student

engagement in a “ready-made” history course is low, and alienation from instruction is high.

Active-Learning Strategies and Student Engagement

Active-learning strategies “are better able to insulate students from alienating environments” (Yair, 2000, p. 247) because students are encouraged “to [become] autonomous in their learning” (Goslin, 2003, pp. 20-21). According to Faust and Paulson (1998), “Active learning is . . . anything that students do in a classroom other than merely passively listening to an instructor’s lecture. Active learning includes everything from listening practices . . . to . . . writing exercises . . . to complex group exercises in which students apply course material to ‘real life’ situations and/or to new problems” (p. 4). In short, instructors who differentiate instruction with active-learning strategies are likely to “motivate [students] to learn” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 58).

Student Engagement on the Collegiate Level

College students exhibit “cultures of engagement” by talking to professors outside of class, contributing to discussions, and asking questions (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 108). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) collects survey data from students and faculty at 1,400 four-year colleges in the U.S. and Canada to gauge areas of strength and improvement regarding student engagement. The NSSE survey seeks to find how college students spend their time and how higher education institutions instill “best practices” that foster greater student engagement. The NSSE identified two main features of collegiate student engagement. The first feature is “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities.” The second feature is “how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that . . . are linked to student learning” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012).

The 2011 NSSE survey results concerning student engagement revealed 83% of college seniors reported they had conversations with faculty or advisors about their career plans and spent on average 15 hours a week studying (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). Two thirds of students who responded in the survey said they take “careful notes” and review notes after class, and 70% of student respondents sought help from faculty or other college resources when he or she did not understand

course material (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). A shortcoming of the NSSE survey is that the data do not provide evidence of the quality of active learning in the classroom, only the frequency with which students said they engaged in these activities (Kuh, 2003). Additionally, community college students and faculty were not surveyed by NSSE.

Nontraditional College Students and Active-Learning Strategies

Community colleges serve traditional and nontraditional college students. Traditional college students are those who enter college directly after high school graduation between the ages of 18 and 19 or younger. Nontraditional students are "older, mature age students studying mainly on a part-time basis . . . and . . . students who only in recent times have aspired to a university education" (Munro, 2011, p. 115). According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), the three groups of nontraditional students at community colleges consist of people who lost their jobs due to the 2008 U.S. recession, veterans returning from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and those with a high school diploma or GED returning to school after several years.

Because community colleges serve diverse learners, these institutions "have . . . been at the vanguard of several pedagogical initiatives," such as implementing active-learning strategies for students who "do not always profit from traditional college lecture" (Tai, 2004, p. 32). Given the changes in technology, information acquisition, and the needs of students over the past decade, many community colleges encourage instructors to use active-learning strategies. Since many nontraditional students possess skills that may be practical in the workplace but not in school, the implementation of active-learning strategies may provide different opportunities for students to discover how history courses can be applicable to their career goals (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), especially if these students are not history majors.

Study Participants

This study on the impact of active-learning strategies on student engagement in undergraduate history courses took place at a community college in a metropolitan region in the Southeast. A mix of traditional and nontraditional students participated in this survey, and the ages of enrolled traditional and nontraditional students who attend all campuses of this community college where this study took place ranged from 18 to over 65 (see Table 1).

Table 1
Average Student Ages

| <i>Average Student Ages (based on 2010 and 2011 data)</i> | |
|---|---------------------|
| Institution | Average Age |
| Entire College | 24.8 |
| Researcher's Campus | 23.6 |
| Class 1 | 20.4 |
| Class 2 | 22.0 |
| Class 3 | 21.625 |
| Class 4 | 25.13 |
| Class 5 | 23.18 |
| <i>Student Ages [for the entire campus?] (based on 2010 data)</i> | |
| <i>Age</i> | <i>No. Enrolled</i> |
| Under 18 | 1,107 |
| 18-19 | 5,546 |
| 20-21 | 4,847 |
| 22-24 | 4,156 |
| 25-29 | 3,629 |
| 30-34 | 2,310 |
| 35-39 | 1,533 |
| 40-49 | 1,470 |
| 50-64 | 399 |
| 65+ | 53 |

Seventy-nine out of 96 students at one campus of this community college participated in a survey about the impact of active-learning strategies on student engagement in undergraduate history courses during one 15-week semester. Classes 1-5 were capped at 35 students, and the average

Table 2
Demographics (based on data from 2009)

| Institution | Total No. Enrolled Students | % Male | % Female | % Asian | % African American | % Hispanic | % Multi-Racial | % Native American | % White |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------|----------|---------|--------------------|------------|----------------|-------------------|---------|
| Entire College | 24,549 | 38.7% | 61.3% | 8.2% | 41.8% | 5.8% | 3.4% | 0.3% | 29.1% |
| Researchers' Campus | 6,558 | 45.5% | 54.5% | 14.2% | 22.6% | 10.5% | 3.4% | 0.3% | 33.2% |
| Class 1 | 26 | 53.84% | 46.15% | 15.38% | 15.38% | 7.6% | 7.6% | 0.0% | 53.84% |
| Class 2 | 23 | 52.17% | 43.47% | 6.25% | 31.25% | 12.5% | 12.5% | 0.0% | 37.5% |
| Class 3 | 11 | 45.45% | 54.54% | 16.6% | 33.3% | 16.6% | 16.6% | 16.6% | 16.6% |
| Class 4 | 20 | 45.0% | 55.0% | 17.6% | 5.88% | 17.6% | 5.88% | 0.0% | 23.52% |
| Class 5 | 16 | 56.25% | 43.75% | 16.6% | 25.0% | 8.3% | 16.6% | 0.0% | 16.6% |

Note. Racial identification of students in Classes 1-5 was based on total number of survey participants who volunteered demographic information, not the total enrolled number of students in each class.

number of students in each class was 15. Instructional time was one hour and 15 minutes per class meeting. One student in Class 4 identified herself as a history major; all other student participants in Classes 1-5 were not **[were majoring in other areas?]** . Students in Classes 1-5 represented a sample of the demographics across all the campuses of the community college where this study was conducted, as summarized in Table 2.

Implementing Active Learning in Classes 1-5

The instructor implemented active-learning strategies using graphic organizers to facilitate student discussions of history material by planning the semester into four units of study where topics were taught as related concepts and themes (for instance, teaching World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War together). Each unit lasted seven days where the instructor planned specific tasks and activities for each day of the unit:

Day 1: The instructor introduced unit topics with a K-W-L chart (students write what they *know*, what they *want* to know, and what they *learned* from a particular unit of study; see Appendix B [**Appendix A should be referenced before B; should we change the Appendix letters?**]) for student groups to activate their prior historical knowledge.

Day 2: The instructor showed a documentary from PBS, the History Channel, or Annenberg Media about the unit topics with questions for student groups to answer and discuss.

Day 3: The instructor delivered an “enhanced lecture” (Marcketti, 2011) with a PowerPoint presentation of major concepts in the unit of study using discussion prompts and visuals (photographs, political cartoons, and the like) followed by student groups answering questions about textbook readings.

Day 4: Student groups completed of primary source analysis with document-based questions using a graphic organizer.

Day 5: Student groups analyzed current events’ connections to history content by reading newspaper articles and taking notes on a graphic organizer.

Day 6: Student groups completed a post-reading chart, wrote summaries of chapter topics, and created questions about unit topics that were to be answered from course readings and class discussion.

Day 7: Student groups posed their questions about unit topics in a class discussion. The instructor collected the questions and responses, graphic organizers, and chapter summaries and graded the student work as collaborative writing assignments. At the end of each unit, students took individual multiple-choice exams.

Method, Data Collection, and Analysis Procedures

A 30-question survey was distributed to Classes 1-5 to ascertain student sentiments about how active-learning strategies influence engagement (see Appendix A). Students responded by choosing from six options of *strongly disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *disagree*, *somewhat agree*, *agree*, or *strongly agree* for each question on the survey. The total number of student responses for each question of the survey are shown in Table 3. Written student comments were analyzed to garner qualitative data regarding students' perceptions of active-learning strategies with respect to engagement. Student comments are referenced in the "Findings" section as "Field Notes." Student grades on multiple-choice exams and collaborative writing assignments served as a measure of the effectiveness of active-learning strategies on engagement. Field tests were conducted a month before the official survey was distributed.

Findings

The researchers organized each question on the survey into three major categories pertaining to student engagement after the survey was collected. The first category involved the impact of group discussion on engagement in undergraduate history courses. The second category included the role of instructor as facilitator on students' engagement in undergraduate history courses. The third category was the use of graphic organizers to foster engagement in undergraduate history courses. All themes were not unique to one another, but defined from the questions and student responses on the surveys, as seen in Figure 1.

Table 3
Number of Student Responses on Student Engagement Survey, Classes 1-5

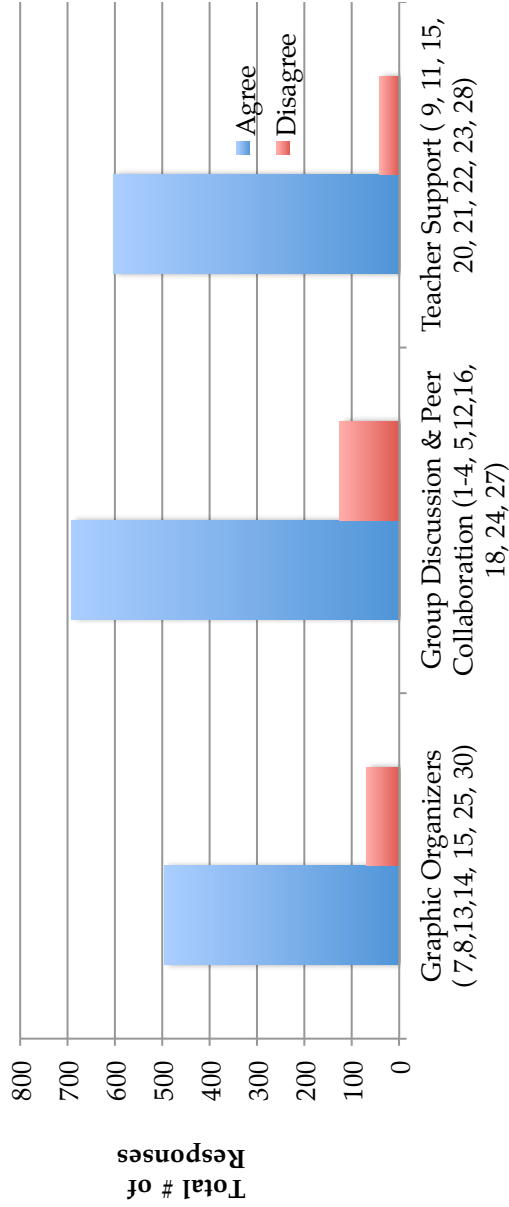
| Question No. | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Moderately Disagree | Moderately Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--------------|-------------------|----------|---------------------|------------------|-------|----------------|
| Question 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 12 | 25 | 39 |
| Question 2 | 6 | 7 | 10 | 15 | 27 | 17 |
| Question 3 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 13 | 31 | 23 |
| Question 4 | 3 | 7 | 7 | 10 | 34 | 22 |
| Question 5 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 18 | 26 | 30 |
| Question 6 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 17 | 29 | 25 |
| Question 7 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 21 | 24 | 20 |
| Question 8 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 24 | 28 | 20 |
| Question 9 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 12 | 24 | 42 |
| Question 10 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 28 | 41 |
| Question 11 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 21 | 57 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| Question 12 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 11 | 33 | 29 |
| Question 13 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 17 | 24 | 28 |
| Question 14 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 14 | 33 | 24 |
| Question 15 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 26 | 43 |
| Question 16 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 14 | 35 | 26 |
| Question 17 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 32 | 29 |
| Question 18 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 14 | 24 | 27 |
| Question 19 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 35 | 38 |
| Question 20 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 22 | 55 |
| Question 21 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 28 | 40 |
| Question 22 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 18 | 31 | 23 |
| Question 23 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 16 | 28 | 26 |

Table 3 (continued)
Number of Student Responses on Student Engagement Survey, Classes 1-5

| Question No. | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Moderately Disagree | Moderately Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--------------|-------------------|----------|---------------------|------------------|-------|----------------|
| Question 24 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 12 | 28 | 28 |
| Question 25 | 2 | 4 | 8 | 25 | 23 | 18 |
| Question 26 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 19 | 27 | 24 |
| Question 27 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 19 | 32 | 17 |
| Question 28 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 14 | 26 | 27 |
| Question 29 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 13 | 31 | 23 |
| Question 30 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 29 | 38 |

Figure 1
Rate of Responses to Survey Questions, Classes 1-5 (Organized by Category)



Survey Categories and Questions

Note. Questions 10 and 19 (Multiple-Choice Exams) and Questions 6, 26, and 29 (Collaborative Writing) were omitted from the graph but included in the study findings as measures of student engagement. Teacher Support includes use of technology (questions 9, 15, 21, and 28).

Category I: Group Discussion and Student Engagement

The majority of students in Classes 1-5 agreed that having group discussions about history topics and content in primary sources, textbook readings, documentaries, and newspaper articles positively impacted their engagement. As one student in Class 3 noted, "Class discussion allows me to take a better interest in the course" (Field Notes, October 21, 2011). Group discussions were designed to support students' "critical consciousness" about their prior knowledge and new historical information learned, as the classroom became "the marketplace of ideas where explanations are debated and analyzed" (Singer, 2003, pp. 7, 17-21, 30).

The re-socialization of classroom roles with instructor-as-facilitator took the first couple of weeks of the semester. While some students felt comfortable working in groups, a consensus of students in Classes 1-5 on Day 1 of the first unit of study expressed concerns about how they would learn the course material working with peers if the instructor did not lecture. The instructor addressed the students' concerns in every class by explaining her role as a facilitator, in which she would lecture on occasion when topics and instructions needed clarification. She told the students she would come to every group to help with completing their assignments, but she expected them to work together using the course materials to create questions and responses for class discussion and collaborative writing assignments. Additionally, the instructor reiterated that she was available during office hours to help individual students and groups on assignments.

The instructor explained the role of "historical thinking" processes (Bohan & Davis, 1998; Drake & Brown, 2003; VanSledright, 1998), in which she expected student groups to use a variety of primary and secondary sources to complete collaborative writing assignments and refer to during class discussions. According to Drake and Brown (2003), the multiple-source approach to teaching history is "complex, usually involving . . . group techniques, because a variety of sources are brought to bear on a topic in the classroom" (pp. 466-467). College instructors who use the multiple-source approach to teaching history should have students work in groups in order to provide purpose and motivation for reading a particular document or text (Drake & Brown, 2003). The instructor established rapport with students and balanced lecturing and active-learning strategies in order to help students acclimate to a collaborative setting that, for many, was not a familiar methodology in undergraduate history courses.

Category II: Instructor Facilitation of Student Engagement

Instructor facilitation of active-learning strategies involved setting the expectations of the tasks to be completed at the beginning of each lesson, conducting a brief brainstorming activity or short discussion of the previous day's materials, introducing new topics with a short lecture using PowerPoint, and modeling new skills to the class before facilitating group work. The instructor reinforced skills and supported students by circulating in the classroom and observing and assisting students within their groups. The final 15-20 minutes of class were reserved for student groups to share information they learned after completing a particular task.

According to Skinner and Belmont (1993) there is a reciprocal relationship between student engagement and instructor involvement. As stated in Category I's findings, the instructor's assisting students during group work was crucial for implementing active-learning strategies to improve engagement. Students in Classes 1-5 agreed that instructor support during group activities contributed to student engagement; as one student stated, having the instructor "coming around to each group makes me feel comfortable about asking questions" (Field Notes, October 21, 2011). Students indicated that lectures with PowerPoint presentations "help[ed] to highlight major points" of course readings (Field Notes, November 1, 2011). The instructor's use of lecture and active-learning strategies is indicative of her being a "wise practitioner" of pedagogy because she "alternate[d] between different modes of teaching" (Wineburg, 2001, p. 170) based on the needs of the classes.

While most students stated that "e-mail [was] more convenient" when seeking assistance from the instructor (Field Notes, October 21, 2011), several students recognized the importance of attending the instructor's office hours. As one student said, he or she "need[ed] to do . . . more" **[Do more what?]** (Field Notes, October 31, 2011). Full-time faculty at the community college where this study took place must teach a minimum of 5-6 courses per semester and conduct 8-10 office hours per week for tutoring and student advisement. Despite Arum and Roksa's (2011) claims of a "disengagement compact" being brokered on college campuses, which they characterized as the "breakdown of shared responsibility for learning on the part of faculty members who are accepting minimal effort from students and students who are not taking advantage of the resources institutions provide to help them" (p. 5), instructors at the community college where this study was conducted are expected to spend considerable time teaching and assisting students outside of class.

Category III: Graphic Organizers and Student Engagement

While students indicated on the survey that having strong reading and writing skills were important in order “not to struggle” (Field Notes, October 24, 2011) in an undergraduate history course, most students did not agree that using graphic organizers improved their engagement. As one student from Class 2 noted,

I feel the workload is burdensome. My only worry is that those who are not interested in history, or as eager to learn as I am, will not only have a difficult time in the class, but will not easily find a desire to learn and will focus more on trying to find shortcuts to the work than actually learning the materials. (Field Notes, October 31, 2011)

Collaborative writing assignments, in which students used graphic organizers to write summaries about unit topics of study and craft responses to student-created questions based on course materials, were due every three to four weeks. The high frequency of due dates for written assignments may have impacted engagement, as some students felt they were getting the work done for the sake of submitting assignments on time. **[I’m not sure I follow this.]** Additionally, assignments in undergraduate history courses at community colleges need to be relevant to the interests and career goals of adult learners in order to promote engagement. In spite of the instructor’s efforts to use newspaper articles to connect current events to history content, students’ sense of the efficacy of the assignments may have also impacted their actual engagement.

Moreover, students who disagreed that graphic organizers aided engagement expressed concerns about the rigidity of using only one notetaking method. A student in Class 3 stated he or she somewhat agreed using graphic organizers helped with engagement, because “people have different learning styles on notetaking” (Field Notes, November 2, 2011). Students’ disagreement about using graphic organizers to improve engagement could be because some students were more autonomous in their learning and preferred completing assignments without notetaking aids. In summary, we **[Earlier you used “the researchers.” Let’s be consistent—I think first person is fine.]** found that instructor facilitation of group discussions with enhanced lectures and one-on-one assistance during group work fostered student engagement, while the use of graphic organizers did not.

Measuring [the Effectiveness of?] Active-Learning Strategies

Student grades on collaborative writing assignments and multiple-choice exams served as a measure of the effectiveness of active-learning strategies on student engagement. The average grades for Classes 1-5 on collaborative writing assignments showed some improvement in students' historical comprehension skills, but the improvement was not significant, as seen in Table 4. Mistakes using the Chicago citation method, errors in grammar and spelling, failures to complete papers by the due date, difficulties cooperating with group members, lack of proactive communication with the instructor, and absenteeism from class assignments were issues for many students in Classes 1-5, as evidenced in the collaborative writing grades shown in Table 4.

Students in Classes 1-5 scored significantly higher on multiple-choice exams as compared to collaborative writing assignments, as seen in Table 5. **[The comparison is not shown in Table 5, only when comparing Tables 4 and 5.]** The instructor administered multiple-choice exams in order to provide opportunities for students who did not have strong reading and writing skills to perform on different types of assessments. Students in Classes 1-5 expressed that studying for multiple-choice exams aided in their engagement more than completing collaborative writing assignments did. As a student in Class 5 noted, "multiple choice [exams] makes it easier for students to score good grades" (Field Notes, November 1, 2011). Student perceptions that multiple-choice exams were easier to complete than collaborative writing assignments may be because students were fatigued from the intense writing assignments that were due every three to four weeks. **[Or also perhaps because they perceived the grading of the writing as more subjective?]**

Subjectivity was an additional issue with regard to using multiple-choice assessments as a measure of student engagement. According to Ravitch (2010), "Tests are extremely valuable in measuring student achievement, [but] they are subjective" (pp. 150-152). The instructor added more questions to the third multiple-choice test because of student concerns that having fewer questions on an exam meant each question was worth more points. The scores on the third multiple-choice exam for Classes 1-5 increased after the instructor made this modification.

| <i>Class</i> | <i>Average Writing Assignment Grade #1</i> | <i>Average Writing Assignment Grade #2</i> | <i>Average Writing Assignment Grade #3</i> |
|--------------|--|--|--|
| Class 1 | 80.653% | 76.80% | 80.0% |
| Class 2 | 73.5% | 70.7% | 73.6% |
| Class 3 | 60.0% | 74.9% | 69.7% |
| Class 4 | 83.75% | 80.15% | 86.31% |
| Class 5 | 80.125% | 80.25% | 66.0% |

| <i>Class</i> | <i>Test #1 Average Grade</i> | <i>Test #2 Average Grade</i> | <i>Test #3 Average Grade</i> |
|--------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Class 1 | 87.35% | 78.00% | 85.0% |
| Class 2 | 85.14% | 82.80% | 85.52% |
| Class 3 | 82.92% | 75.38% | 86.82% |
| Class 4 | 91.50% | 88.95% | 92.35% |
| Class 5 | 73.86% | 79.88% | 79.94% |

Other Implications and Unintended Consequences: Peer Collaboration

The completion of collaborative writing assignments was contingent upon student collaboration outside of class. Student responses varied concerning the effectiveness of peer collaboration on engagement. One student noted that working with peers helped him or her to “Get . . . others’ perspectives helps me think deeper on the topic” (Field Notes, October 25, 2011). Another student, who disagreed that peer collaboration contributed to engagement, stated,

I do feel that the group teaming is not such a good idea because . . . not all members participate and its [sic] not always fair to the other members who have to carry the burden of completing the assignment. (Field Notes, November 1, 2011)

Concerning student attitudinal objectives, Ediger (2002) notes the following:

Quality attitudes must be developed by each student. . . . With good attitudes, students can achieve as optimally as possible. With poor attitudes towards learning, students may develop the following negative traits:

1. Feeling that a course is not worthy in putting forth much effort.
2. Missing class sessions and/or being tardy without cause.
3. Cheating on tests, if possible, to secure "good grades."
4. Putting forth little effort into course assignments and obligations.
5. Being disrespectful towards others. (p. 405)

Students who disagreed that peer collaboration positively impacted their engagement indicated frustrations about the poor attitudinal objectives of other classmates. Although students were to hold each other accountable with anonymous peer evaluation rubrics given directly to the instructor, it was unclear whether students gave accurate feedback concerning the quantity and quality of work peers did on the collaborative writing assignments. Students may not have wanted their comments to negatively impact theirs or their classmates' grades. We found a delicate balance must be struck between assigning and grading group work in order to secure the integrity of students' individual and collaborative efforts on assignments.

Results

The survey data revealed that some active-learning strategies improved student engagement in the undergraduate history courses, and others did not. Students indicated that preparing for multiple-choice exams, instructor support during group work, enhanced lectures, and group discussions on course material improved engagement. Students identified the poor

attitudinal objectives [attitudes?] of some peers, the overabundance of collaborative writing assignments, and the use of graphic organizers as least effective in promoting engagement in the courses.

We found there were several advantages to implementing active-learning strategies in community college undergraduate history courses. The instructor's detailed organization, which included the distribution of a schedule of due dates and tasks to be completed for each day of a unit in the syllabus, established a routine for students to use to complete assignments. Students were also able to discuss how life experiences connected to history content when active-learning strategies were employed. For example, students in Class 4 frequently asked an octogenarian student about his experiences living through World War II and the Cold War. This student brought in photographs of Hitler's bunker in Germany that he had taken during his tour of duty as an optometrist in the U.S. Army to share with the class. The exchanges between the students provided an invaluable learning experience about the applicability of history to peoples' lives.

We found that the disadvantages of implementing active-learning strategies in the history courses involved an imbalance of students' individual and group efforts on assignments. Community college history instructors need to plan active-learning strategies in a manner such that individual student grades are not diminished or inflated due to the efforts of other students. Furthermore, assignments must be designed to give students opportunities to discover how history courses are applicable to their career goals, thus improving their engagement and motivation to learn.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. The researchers do not know whether using graphic organizers during one semester will improve students' engagement long-term. Wade (1983) found that the most successful active-learning strategies or "functional approaches" were those sustained over the course of several months (p. 462). Time constraints can also hinder the improvement of student engagement, because "the efficiencies of lecturing, textbook reading . . . become deeply attractive" when an instructor must cover a large amount of content in the short amount of time a semester affords (VanSledright, Kelly, & Meuwissen, 2006, p. 213). According to a student in Class 5, the breadth of content for the world history class was too much to cover in "too small of a segment [of time]" (Field Notes, November 1, 2011).

Shortly after this research study was conducted, the director of the teaching and learning center at the college identified history as one of

two areas in the college with the highest rates of student failures and withdrawals based upon department assessments at a faculty professional development day. After this announcement, the director met with the history faculty in a separate meeting, where she suggested taking field trips to improve engagement. The history professors at the meeting defended lecturing [**Were lecturing and the field trips mutually exclusive?**]. Because this community college was undergoing its accreditation review at the time, the administration had encouraged faculty to use active-learning strategies to improve student engagement. With the onset of severe budgetary constraints, however, training instructors to facilitate active-learning strategies, in addition to field trips, has yet to be offered. Moreover, the financial issues at the college led to the increase of faculty course loads and average class size. As a result, if history instructors at this community college must continue to lecture exclusively due to time constraints, lack of professional development, or increased teaching duties, it is unlikely that students will develop the skills to be engaged in their history courses without the reinforcement of active-learning strategies in other courses. [**Are they getting this?**]

The researchers relied on self-study, data analysis of student responses on the surveys, and grades on collaborative writing assignments and multiple-choice exams to measure the effectiveness of active-learning strategies on engagement. This study could be improved if an outside colleague or administrator observed the instructor's classes in order to provide feedback as to how active-learning strategies impact student engagement. Moreover, the researchers had learned the constructivist pedagogies they used in the university and secondary private and public schools they had attended. As a result, their predisposition to teaching with active-learning strategies could bias the outcome of this study if they [**the researchers?**] focused on finding students who agreed that active-learning strategies positively affected engagement and overlooked those students who disagreed.

Conclusions

We found that balancing lecture with active-learning strategies improved student engagement in undergraduate history courses at a community college. Overall, the majority of students who participated in this study believed active-learning strategies in their history courses were effective. As one student remarked, "I . . . enjoyed hearing the perspectives from the other groups. Thank you so much for introducing this method of learning. . . . I've have never learned and retained so much about history

before” (Field Notes, December 8, 2011). Teaching is not a perfect science, nor is it a perfect craft. Students’ perceptions about how active-learning strategies affect engagement are complex. However, the implementation of active-learning strategies in undergraduate history courses can foster engagement in an academic environment conducive to sharing ideas. Instructors who step out of their comfort zones and implement some effective active-learning strategies can help community college instructors [students?] become more astute and engaged teachers [learners?] .

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Appendix A
Student Engagement Survey (Abridged)*

Directions: Please place the letter of your choice for each question on the provided response sheet as follows:

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| a. Strongly disagree | b. Somewhat disagree |
| c. Disagree | d. Somewhat agree |
| e. Agree | f. Strongly agree |
1. I think having class discussions with student-created questions we respond to contributes to my engagement in a history class.
 2. I think having class discussions on online discussion boards with student-created questions we respond to contributes to my engagement in a history class
 3. I think working in small groups on activities with primary source documents contributes to my engagement in a history class.
 4. I think working in small groups on activities with current events articles contributes to my engagement in a history class.
 5. I think small group activities using guided questions from the textbook contributes to my engagement in a history class.
 6. I think writing summaries of textbook chapters using examples from guided questions from the textbook, primary sources, and newspaper articles contribute to my engagement in a history class.
 7. I think pre-reading activities that ask me what I know and want to know about a new chapter contributes to my engagement in a history class.
 8. I think post-reading activities that ask me what I learned about a new chapter contribute to my engagement in a history class.
 9. I think watching documentaries on history topics contribute to my engagement in a history class.
 10. I think multiple-choice assessments contribute to my engagement in a history class.
 11. I think teacher support during group activities contributes to my engagement in history classes.
 12. I think discussing history topics in small groups contributes to my engagement in a history class.
 13. I think reading chapter introductions first when learning a new topic contribute to my engagement in a history class.
 14. I think using outlines for textbook chapter materials contribute to my engagement in a history class.

15. I think watching videos on history topics contribute to my engagement in a history class.
16. I think asking and answering questions in a group setting contributes to my engagement in a history class.
17. I think reading current news articles contribute to my engagement in a history class.
18. I think collaborating with peers contributes to my engagement in a history class.
19. I think studying for multiple-choice exams contribute to my engagement in a history class.
20. I think interactions with my teacher in class contribute to my engagement in a history class.
21. I think teacher lectures with Power Point presentations contribute to my engagement in a history class.
22. I think interactions with my teacher through electronic communication contribute to my engagement in a history class.
23. I think attending teacher office hours contributes to my engagement in a history class.
24. I think student accountability with peer assessment rubrics on group activities contributes to my engagement in a history class.
25. I think using graphic organizer charts for note taking contributes to my engagement in a history class.
26. I think writing summaries of chapter materials using primary sources and newspaper articles contribute to my engagement in a history class.
27. I think small group discussions and using graphic organizers contributes to my liking of history classes.
28. I think the use of technology (i.e.- Power Points) contributes to my engagement in a history course.
29. I think individual writing assignments contribute to my engagement in a history class.
30. I think having strong reading and writing skills contribute to engagement in a history class.

*The 30 questions above are the exact questions on the student engagement survey distributed to classes 1-5. The scale with six choices from A-F were shown only for question 1 for the essence of conserving space for publication.

Appendix B
Sample Graphic Organizer

Name: _____ Course and Section #: _____ Date: _____

Pre-Reading Note Taking Graphic Organizer

Directions: With your group, use the information on the beginning pages of the Unit chapters of study in your textbook to fill in the information below:

Unit Topic (see syllabus): _____

Textbook Information (cite in Chicago style—authors' last and first names, title of book, city of publishing company, publishing company, copyright date):

Chapter #'s, Titles, Page #'s:

Making Predictions:

Directions: Based on the chapter titles and introductions, fill in the chart below with your group:

| What do you think you already know about the material in these chapters? | What issues/problems/themes do you think you will encounter reading these chapters? | What would you like to learn that is new to you about the material from these chapters? |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| <p>How do you think the material in this chapter connects to current events issues and/or your major/career goals? Explain.</p> | | |