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A Grounded Theory Approach to Introductory Literature Program Assessment

Angela Zito
University of Wisconsin-Madison, azito@wisc.edu

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Instructors across disciplines know the pedagogical challenges particular to introductory level courses: What are the goals of this course, knowing many students will not pursue the major? What pedagogical strategies best achieve those goals, and how can I tell those goals have been met? Introductory courses present challenges for program assessment as well, since goals and strategies may differ significantly from courses designed specifically for majors. This research in progress takes a grounded theory approach to assessment of introductory literature courses at a public research university in order to design a program assessment plan “from the ground up” that is reflective of the specific program’s goals, values, and practices.

**Project Design**

This is a multiphase research project. Phase 1 uses constructivist grounded theory methodology to identify student learning goals within the intro lit program. Phase 2 will use direct and indirect measures of student learning to assess the program’s effectiveness in helping students achieve those goals.

**Phase 1 – Grounded Theory**

This project takes a constructivist grounded theory approach in order to build a collective understanding of intro lit learning goals that accounts for the local context and social nature of these courses. This inductive, qualitative research methodology analyzes the complex network of values, perceptions, and practices among the people who constitute the intro lit program: instructors (including faculty and teaching assistants), administrators, and students. The theoretical model presented in Figure 1 visualizes preliminary results regarding interviewees’ descriptions of learning goals for intro lit.

**Phase 2 – Program Assessment**

Using the theoretical model(s) generated in Phase 1, the researcher will work collaboratively with intro lit instructors to design and implement evaluation rubrics for assessment of a sample of intro lit student writing at the end of Fall 2017 and to distribute an end-of-semester survey to intro lit students.

**Phase 1: Methods**

- Semi-structured interviews with intro lit instructors and administrators, conducted in Fall 2016
  - eight faculty lecturers (three of whom also serve in department administration)
  - nine graduate teaching assistants
  - one college-level curriculum administrator
- Interviews transcribed and coded through multiple rounds of process- and *in vivo*-coding
- Analytic memoing to theorize relationships among raised concepts (see theoretical model in Figure 1 above)

**Preliminary Results**

- Figure 1 presents a working model of the grounded theory raised from Phase 1 coded interview data
- “READ LITERATURE” is proposed as a starting point (i.e. in this class, students will read literature)
- Arrows indicate relationships among *in vivo*-coded learning goals in black
  - arrows read “in order to” (e.g. in this class, students will read literature in order to get tools)
- Size of learning goal indicates frequency of identification (larger font = more widely identified throughout program)

**Discussion**

- Collectively, the intro lit program believes intro lit learning is and should be widely applicable to students’ cross-curricular and extra-curricular lives
- Either through or in addition to this applicability, the program also wants intro lit to enable and/or reinforce students’ appreciation of literature
- A pragmatic theorization of intro lit emerges: Reading literature is valuable not intrinsically but for its uses
- Visualizing a theory of learning based on the beliefs and practices of those most directly involved can help instructors and administrators approach program assessment collectively and productively

**Next Steps**

- Code and raise concepts from pedagogical strategies and assessment practices as presented in interview data and course documents (e.g. syllabi, assignments)
- Compare and/or combine Phase 1 theoretical models (i.e. “goals” model and “pedagogy” model) to more thoroughly visualize the program’s “theory of intro lit” in practice
- Interview students enrolled in intro lit to put their perceptions in conversation theoretical models
- Partner with intro lit faculty to design and implement Phase 2 direct and indirect assessment