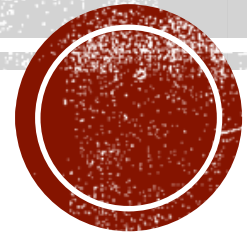# COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS DERIVING VALUE FROM A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR CURRICULUM

Claire Maxson

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Participants will
  - informally learn about photo-elicitation and learn of the benefits of practicing the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to formalize their own curriculum review.

  - see a four-step process to tackle implementing new initiatives or developing new assignments within the first-year seminar curriculum.

  - Can reflect on how they see the four steps (reflect, visualize, write, and plan) may apply in their work. The steps could be applied to designing curriculum, building relationships, applying skills across life roles, finding avenues for student expression and more.

In this instrumental case study, situated within the tenets of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), I aimed to better understand how community college students derived value from a first-year seminar curriculum.

Designed using the steps below, students recorded instances of perceived personal growth and skill application through writing and visual mediums.

| Students **reflected** on how course concepts applied to them personally. | Students **visualized** how they saw these skills in action in their future. | Students **wrote** about current and future application of skills in four projects. | Students developed a **plan** for putting key ideas into action. |

I collected and analyzed assignments of 16 student volunteers from two virtually delivered sections of which I was the instructor. Of the 16 participants, nine took part in a voluntary interview about their experience at the end of the term.
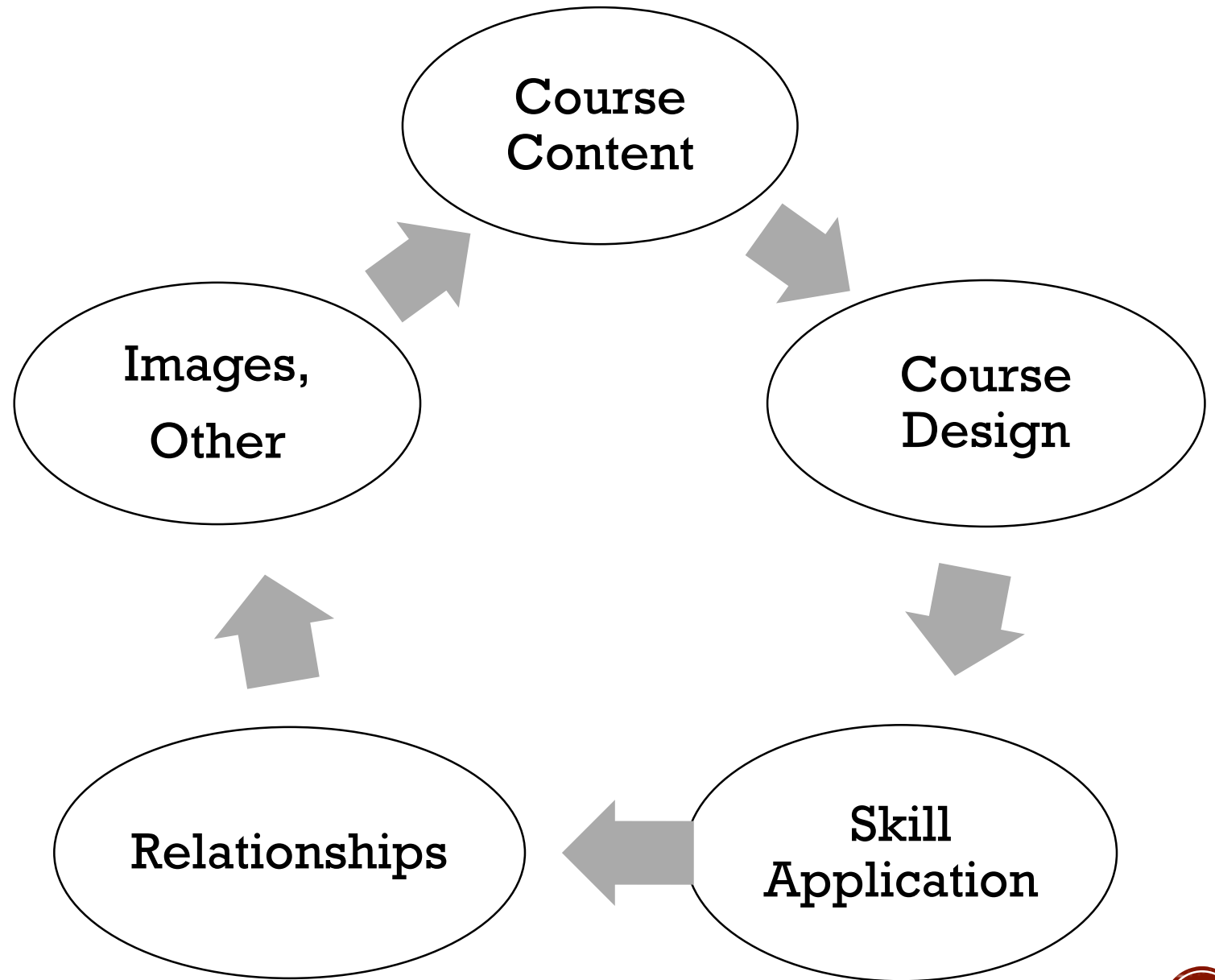
The following singular question guided my research:

- How do community college students derive value from a first-year seminar curriculum?

Short answer:

- Time to reflect on life experiences and goals as well as space to build relationships

Course Content

Course Design

Skill Application

Relationships

Images, Other

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- This instrumental case study was bounded by enrollment in a virtually delivered first-year seminar *Student Success* course, one summer and one fall section, of which I was the instructor. The strength of case study research is the insights gained from in-depth study of the particular (Simons, 2014).

- Scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty to explore their own teaching, as well as their students' learning, and to share this in ways that colleagues may also benefit from these new insights (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). Teaching as a form of scholarship is fitting for community colleges where "the application of knowledge would be an especially appropriate emphasis" (Boyer, 1990, p. 60).

LITERATURE

- First-year seminars increase retention and improve student performance if they include coping skills, stress management, and ways to increase motivation among academic skills (Permzadian & Crede, 2015).

- Adult students must reflect on the new role of student and how it fits with their interests and goals outside of school, and perhaps, even more importantly how this interacts with their relationships (Kegan, 1994).

- Nurturing the relationships within the classroom can increase retention within the course because students act as a support network (Baxter Magolda, 2000).

RESEARCH DESIGN

- A qualitative case study is an intense, holistic view of a program (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). The design of this case study contained numerical, visual, and reflective perceptions of transferable skills for community college students enrolled in a first-year seminar. This design along with interviews was an attempt to be a holistic study.

- Photo-elicitation, a qualitative research method, was used. Students were asked to include photos or other visual mediums throughout the projects that connect with the course objectives as well as soft skills. The value of a photo-elicitation project involves images owned by the participants to invoke comments, memory, and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview (Banks, 2018).

- One semi-structured photo-elicited interview conducted and recorded via Zoom with each participant and scheduled for 45 minutes.

Courses transitioned to virtual delivery. Initial class meeting focused on course expectations.

Course material delivered weekly through video and Zoom. Assignment deadlines throughout the eight weeks.

Individual Zoom meetings during weeks four and eight served as midterm and final grade discussions.

All assignments due prior to participant interviews in week 8.

SUMMER PARTICIPANTS

Of the six participants in the summer, three engaged in the interview.

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnic Origin	Sex	Area of Study	Interview	Visual mediums
Clay			Male	Geology		
Grace	52	White, American	Female	Business Administration	X	X
Holly			Female	Culinary Arts		X
Mason	23	Vietnamese	Male	Business Administration	X	X
Nicki	29	Black, Nigerian	Female	Nursing	X	X
Penny			Female	General Studies		

FALL PARTICIPANTS

- Of the 10 participants in the fall, six engaged in the interview.

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnic Origin	Sex	Area of Study	Interview	Visual mediums
Alex	27	Asian, Chin	Male	Accounting	X	X
Blythe	50	White	Female	Paralegal Studies	X	X
Darryl			Male	Entrepreneurship		
Ellis	20		Male	Business Administration		
Flora			Female	Sustainable Architecture		
Irene			Female	Archeology or Paleontology		X
Jackie	32	White, Caucasian	Female	Culinary Arts	X	X
Kim	34	African American	Female	Mortuary Science	X	
Lynn	19	White, Caucasian	Female	Elementary Education	X	X
Opal	48	White, Lebanese	Female	Accounting	X	X

SOURCES OF DATA

Over 175 individual assignments were collected including inventory reflections, course projects, and discussion board posts and replies.

Visual perceptions of first-year seminar concepts guided participant interviews. The interview responses were a source of data.

The self-inventory, reviewed for changes in scores, was incorporated into the findings using descriptive statistics.

A researcher's journal served as a record of both classes. I also logged progress of the study including the data collection and analysis.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Throughout the study

Wrote in researcher's journal

Collected:

-Written reflections

-Discussion posts

-Photos and captions

Beginning of study

Case study research opportunity shared in week 3 of each section aligning with Project A.

Middle of Study

Delivered content on key course topics to aid in completion of projects. Graded and provided feedback on assignments.

End of study

Conducted interviews

Analyzed:

-Self-inventory scores and reflections

-Course Assignments

-Interview Responses

Identifying and defining codes while tracking their frequency within these sources of data helped me to identify the following four overarching themes: (a) personal growth; (b) skill improvement; (c) relationship building; and (d) self-expression.

Theme 1
Personal growth

Self-awareness
- Life roles
- Identifying thought, behavior, and emotional patterns as well as strengths and weaknesses

Emotional intelligence
- Managing strong emotions and stress
- Relationship management

Creator mindset
- Accepting responsibility
- Power of choice

Theme 2
Skill improvement

Motivation
- Goal setting
- Action planning

Self-management
- Managing time
- Managing emotions links to emotional intelligence
- Organization

Skill application
- Increasing hard and soft skills
- Examples of application at home, work, and school

Lifelong learning
- Active learning
- Growth mindset

Theme 3
Relationship building

Community
- Sense of belonging
- Relationship development

Empathy
- Social concern
- Cultural awareness

Interdependence

Theme 4
Self-expression

Self-reflection

Personal Affirmations
- Self-talk and self-worth
- Inner guide links to Creator attitude and motivation
- Self-confidence
- Scripts

Imagery

FREQUENCY

Refenced to in all interviews

- Self-Awareness
- Emotional Intelligence
- Skill Improvement
- Self-reflection
- Visual mediums
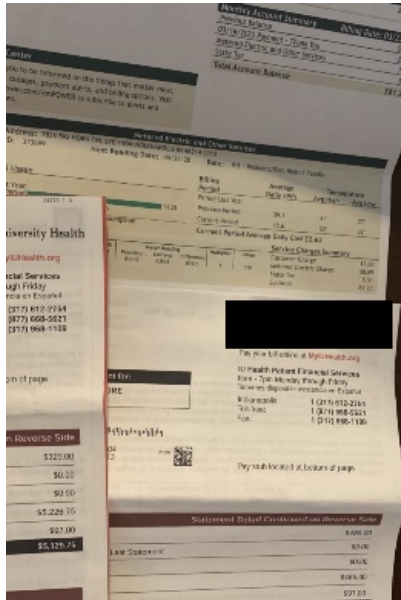
Referenced in all assignments

- Self-Awareness
- Motivation
- Skill application at work
- Empathy and/or awareness of other's struggles
- A sense of building community with classmates
- Interdependence
- Positive self-talk

THEME 1: PERSONAL GROWTH:

Subtheme: Creator Mindset
Nested subtheme: Accepting Responsibility

Left: Nicki shared a photo of her bills for accepting responsibility and following through with commitments, in her interview she shared, "This is me taking responsibility for my bills and not making other people take responsibility for what I have to do. This is a representation of me taking responsibility."

Right: The only photo Blythe submitted was to this prompt. A simple image of the words "I have a choice" written on a piece of paper. A simple, powerful reminder.
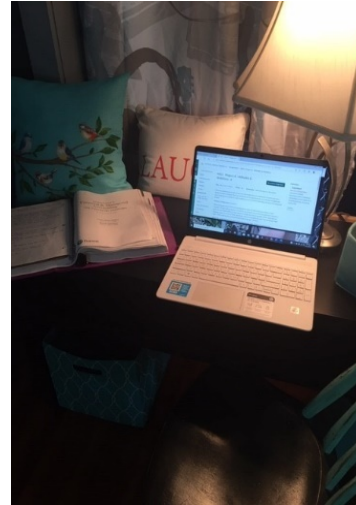
THEME 2: SKILL IMPROVEMENT

Subtheme: Motivation
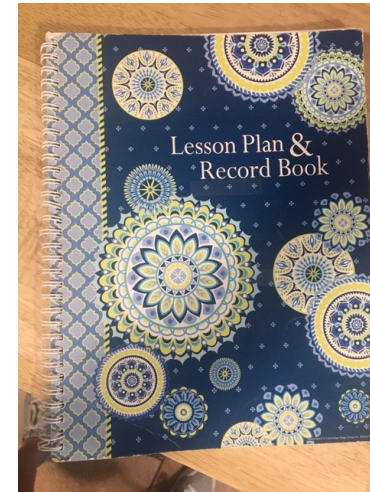Nested subtheme:
Goal setting

Subtheme: Skill Application
Nested subtheme: Increasing hard and soft skills

Opal
Goals,
Family

Jackie
Stress-free

Grace
Discipline

Mason
Observation

INTERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

- Students appeared to apply the course concepts to academic goals. Identifying ways these skills were transferable to work was especially impactful for returning students.

- Participants reflected on the impact of accepting responsibility and what role this plays in their academic journey and beyond. This one example of practicing and improving self-awareness served as a first step to their self-reflective writing.

- Having a sense of belonging and practicing a growth mindset reduces judgement that might come with expressing differences resulting in a safe space to share personal viewpoints.

IMPLICATIONS

- Students: This study shows students what their peers found valuable in this experience. Though a small sample of students participated in the study, thousands of students have interacted with this material. This study gives credibility to the objectives, lessons, and assignments.

- Faculty: Sharing these findings with fellow faculty is a scholarship of teaching and learning practice. The findings from this study will be shared with the local first-year seminar faculty team and institutionwide curriculum committee for potential use for future curriculum planning.

- Administrators: Having the knowledge this study brings allows us to speak as experts in the field. Using "reflect, visualize, write, and plan" for steps in curriculum redevelopment may reduce initiative fatigue.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

- Students did value self-reflection. Students did value the projects. Specifically pairing these two things together in the interview questions before diving into the topics they found the most valuable to reflect, visualize, write, and plan around may yield more insight into the transparency of the curriculum design.

- Focusing on how self-reflection connects directly to the first three steps with action planning as the fourth step would have drawn a more direct line between the assignments and student experience with the material.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum:

- Gain an understanding of the value younger students find in the curriculum

- Consider how specific audiences like English Language Learners (ELL), dual-enrolled high school students, and parents derive value from a first-year seminar curriculum

- Focus on short-term successes to potentially build even more momentum and persistence

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Setting:

- The study being conducted in-person may bring about similar results, but the expressive use of visual mediums may have been enhanced.

- Had the class been meeting face to face, it may have also led to more participants within a single section.

Delivery:

- As course modalities continue to evolve, it is important to continue nurturing the sense of community in first-year seminars.

- I suggest seeking to understand how virtual class settings or use of photo prompts within first-year seminars lead to an increased sense of belonging or academic confidence for ELL students specifically.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

- Claire Maxson
  Dean, School of Business, Logistics, and Supply Chain Management & School of Public Affairs and Social Services

- Professor, Student Success

- cmaxson2@ivytech.edu

- Office: 317-968-1510