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Figure 3. Correlation Output - Numerical.

Relationship Between Number Of Absences And Final Course Percentage For Aco 3203		
Correlation Analysis		
Pearson Correlation Coefficients / Prob :R: under Ho: Rho=0 / N=5		
	Absences	Percent
Absences	1.00000	-0.95695
	0.0	0.0107
Percent	-0.95695	1.00000
Percent Of Total Points Earned	0.0107	0.0

Figure 4. Correlation Output - Graphic.

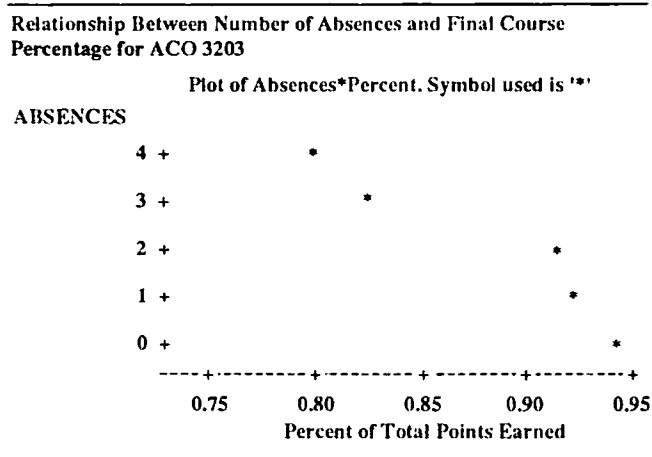


Figure 5. Course Assignment Summary.

Descriptive Statistics For Course ACO 3203--Spring Semester 1990					
N Obs	Variable Label	N	Minimum	Maximum	
5	Assign1 Business Letter	5	60.0000000	100.0000000	
	Assign2 News Article	5	80.0000000	90.0000000	
	Assign3 Technical Report	5	68.0000000	100.0000000	
	Exam Final Examination	5	164.0000000	200.0000000	
	Percent Percent Of Total Points Earned	5	0.7880000	0.9460000	

N Obs	Variable Label	Mean	Std Dev
5	Assign1 Business Letter	86.8000000	16.4681511
	Assign2 News Article	85.0000000	5.0000000
	Assign3 Technical Report	84.6000000	11.9079805
	Exam Final Examination	181.6000000	14.5876660
	Percent Percent Of Total Points Earned	0.8760000	0.0680735

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FRESHMAN COURSE IMPACT

Writing and Information Seeking Skills Developed By Multipurpose Tasks

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Abstract

This study describes the use of assignments which incorporated the use of writing skills, information seeking skills, and specific course information. Current topics in general and agricultural economics were used. Incorporation of utilization of new information technology is described. Results of student surveys show a positive attitudinal response to the assignments. The writing and information seeking activities were also ranked as positive.

Introduction

Writing assignments offer opportunities to achieve many educational objectives (1,8). For ten years short (1-2 page) article summaries and analyses have been used to bring contemporary and current economic issues into general and agricultural economics courses. In the past six years, the faculty of the Agricultural Technical Institute has increased the emphasis on writing across the curriculum (4) in both the general and technical courses offered.¹ In addition, instruction in information seeking skills has been incorporated into the curriculum. Each time students are sent to libraries to investigate and report on course related topics offers opportunities to build library research skills and to encourage students to read with comprehension, evaluate the assigned readings, and report on the topic in clear, written prose. These are skills at higher levels of cognition than simply memorizing facts or doing math computations (5). Such skills can and should be taught in freshman level courses.

Topics

Because a text on economic principles can not cover current events, another approach to studying contemporary economic issues is needed. Five article summaries on various economic topics are required at biweekly intervals. These topics are chosen to represent major economic problems or issues facing U.S. society. These can be changed with the national economic times. Inflation and the role of the Federal Reserve in managing money supply and interest

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¹ This was accomplished in our associate degree programs under the leadership of Linda Houston, associate professor of Communications Skills.

rates were the hot topics of the late 70's and early 80's. These have given way to the current topics of escalating cost of health care and the savings and loan system crisis. It seems that the Federal budget deficits and accumulating Federal debt are always on the agenda. In the mid 1980's, financial crises in agriculture and the farm credit system were covered. In the last half of the 1980's, the focus was on the U.S. trade deficits and the associated transfer of ownership of U.S. wealth. The course is not an in-depth overview of macro and microeconomics which takes at least a two-semester or two-quarter sequence. However, it does present the principles of microeconomics as a foundation for subsequent courses in marketing and business management. In addition, it provides an understanding of how the whole economy functions within our political system.

Writing Assignments

Brief writing assignments in the spirit of Stanley's (7) "One Page Wonders" offer opportunities to support the "Writing Across the Curriculum" effort on our campus. Having a sequence of assignments due over time through our ten-week academic quarter provides an opportunity to provide feedback and opportunities for improvement in meeting assignment requirements. These assignments count 50/500 or 10% of the course grade. This seems to be enough to motivate most students to participate seriously in this learning task. Changing some of the topics over time and in particular requiring that all resource materials come from the current calendar year are ways of coping with the potential for plagiarism of old assignments. In recent years all students are introduced to word processing software and given a site licensed software program disk in our freshmen English courses. This familiarity with word processing has reduced the grief that the instructor's insistence on typewritten assignments used to create for students. With several dozen available microcomputers on a campus for 700 full-time students, access to computers has not been a serious problem. Grading these papers takes approximately four to five minutes each including spelling and grammar corrections.

New Information Technology

The students' ability to locate current resources for the article summaries was not left to chance. Students had been introduced to the use of the library through their freshman orientation course required of all students. They were expected to use traditional print indexes such as *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to identify appropriate articles. However, in the past school year, the Agricultural Technical Institute library has added the capability for students to find current resource material using CD-ROM technology. This provided both a need and an opportunity to work more closely with our library staff to introduce the students to the potential and actual utilization of CD-ROM literature searching by topic. As Shank had predicted in the early 80's, the library had become a more complicated environment for the user. "The array of equipment and strategies for finding information will not be self-apparent" (6). In order to make the use of new information technology

more apparent, objectives were written for the library use instruction session. These included identifying how to locate the new microcomputer work station, how to perform some basic computer keyboard operations such as the use of function keys for locating added entries for subject words, and search strategy skills such as how to determine which subject word actually covered this topic. These are currently needed bibliographic search skills (3).

The students were informed of the writing assignment requirements and the list of topics as presented on the course syllabus. During one lecture session, the faculty leader for the library, presents an overview of the potential and use of the CD-ROM microcomputer terminal. She also reviews some basic instruction on literature searching by key words and titles in traditional print media (*Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* volumes).

Throughout the quarter as biweekly topics were investigated, the course instructor met with the librarian and her staff and discussed student progress in the use of the CD-ROM computer work station. Students took to the system readily; the more prior experience they had with traditional search media, like the *Reader's Guide* volumes, the more they appreciated its power and convenience.

Survey Procedure

In an effort to assess the satisfaction of students with assigned writing tasks and with our library staff efforts during this past year to integrate skills and confidence in using the CD-ROM technology to search topics, a ten-question survey instrument was devised and administered. Students completing the course in two class sections Autumn Quarter 1989 (N=94) and one section during Winter Quarter 1990 (N=28) were surveyed. Survey responses were set up so that the most negative responses were scored a one (strongly disagree) and the most positive as a five (strongly agree). The survey instrument is presented as Table 1. The survey instrument allowed respondents to indicate their class rank and academic division.

The surveys were distributed and responses collected during the final exam session giving a 100% return rate. Analysis of the responses showed a positive attitude expressed as a positive grand mean of all ten questions--3.81 for 1989 and 3.92 for 1990. Students were positive both about the value of the assignments and the library staff support for their investigations including the use of the CD-ROM information retrieval system. Student respondents who were negative tended to be negative on almost every question and those who were positive tended to be positive on every question. An attempt to treat class rank and academic division as independent variables with analysis of variance failed to detect any significant relationships for the survey questions treated as dependent variables. The quarter-to-quarter variation for each question mean was only approximately 25% of the standard deviation of each mean response.

The students were happy (not thrilled) with the writing assignments and the library support to do the investigative work. In fact, students from these classes went right to the

Table 1. Student Survey Questions and Summary of Responses

Question	Au '89 (94 Responses)		Wi '90 (28 Responses)	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. The article summary assignment made a useful connection between course material and the real world.	3.70	1.05	4.07	0.81
2. Reading and writing assignments increased my understanding of concepts covered in the Basic Economics course.	3.55	1.00	3.86	0.76
3. Mrs. Copeland's presentation on new technology to find current articles using the Compact Disk Searches was helpful.	3.78	0.94	3.89	0.83
4. The Compact Disk Technology was easy to use in finding current article citations.	3.88	0.90	3.93	0.90
5. The library staff was helpful in explaining the CD-ROM Literature Search Technology and its use.	3.98	0.92	3.75	0.89
6. Finding actual magazines and newspapers in the library was not difficult once I had a few citations to look for on each topic.	3.80	0.92	4.00	0.77
7. Using the Compact Disk System increased my understanding of the use of periodical indexes for locating articles for assignments.	3.72	0.94	3.89	0.92
8. Using the Compact Disk System increased my awareness of the use of more than one subject heading while searching for articles.	3.77	0.87	3.89	0.88
9. Actually writing a summary of the article and a reaction or analysis was more useful than simply reading one.	3.73	0.91	3.96	0.84
10. The ATI Library and its staff have been very helpful in all my courses at ATI with required reference work.	4.17	0.86	4.00	1.02
Mean of all 10 questions	3.81		3.92	

CD-ROM terminal in subsequent quarters to investigate other course topic assignments. They easily used the *Biological and Agricultural Index* disk in lieu of the *Reader's Guide* disk when appropriate.

While four to five minutes per paper is a major commitment of instructor time when 100 assignments are taken home for a weekend, the other course assignments can be more objective permitting an evaluation time trade-off. These writing assignments are invaluable and worthy of inclusion in many courses irrespective of the subject because of their usefulness for teaching current events, information retrieval, reading, thinking, and writing skills.

Conclusions

In addition, these assignments have emphasized the role of the student as an information seeker. A recent study showed that students sought information for course requirements and that student "information seeking behaviors appear to be motivated primarily by their programs' demands . . ." (2).

In addressing the students' needs to be informed about current topics in economics, we have also encouraged them to use new technology to gain confidence in their ability to seek information for their writing assignments.

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