The Scavenger Hunt as an Active Learning Technique

Introducion

Scholars have found that active learning techniques such as problem-solving exercises and case studies can improve students' retention and understanding of course material (Carr, Palmer, and Hagel, 2015; Chi, 2009; Myers and Jones, 1993; Prince, 2004; Scott et al., 2009). Active learning techniques are often focused on the *application* of information and, consequently, are frequently used after the student has been exposed to at least some amount of course material.

One active learning technique that can be incorporated at the beginning of a course or module, even before the student has been exposed to any material, is the scavenger hunt. In an academic version of this popular childhood game, students must search for information, resources, or experiences pre-identified by the instructor. Depending on the material being taught, the hunt can be conducted online, in a library, in a department, or even in the community (see, for example, McCain, 2007; Sergist, D and Nordstrom, C, 2007; Virgin, 1996).

The focus of this Teaching Tip is scavenger hunts for online resources. We describe two different applications of the technique and then assess what we have found to be the pedagogical benefits.

Variation #1: Investigating the Management of Nonprofit Organizations

The scavenger hunt has been used successfully as the first assignment in an undergraduate, upper division course on the fundamentals of nonprofit management. This version of the scavenger hunt is conducted electronically, appearing on the online learning platform in the form of a quiz. Students open the quiz and are directed to visit specific websites and to retrieve specific information related to material that will be covered during the semester. For example, students are asked to review a list of types of nonprofit organizations and to identify one type of organization they find surprising. They then must go to two different websites, research that organization further, and answer a series of questions about the organization (e.g., mission of the organization, number of staff members, annual revenues and expenses, etc.).

Once they have gathered these data, students are asked to reflect upon their perceptions of the organization and how those perceptions may have changed as they learned more about how the organization operates. Students are also asked to gather and reflect upon data from the websites of both compulsory and non-compulsory regulatory agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, Guidestar, and Charity Navigator. These agencies and data sources are discussed in lectures and activities throughout the course. Estimated time: 30-60 minutes.

Variation #2: Discovering Policy Using Library Resources

The process for this activity is as follows: Instructor collaborates with a subject specialist librarian to discuss resources needed ahead of the activity. Students meet at the library computer lab and work in pairs to "collect" the information they need to complete a worksheet. The librarian provides an orientation of online library resources and shows students how to access relevant materials that enable them to answer the questions; the instructor circulates to answer content questions. The librarian also directs students to their specialist webpage that compiles resources from scholarly and government agencies (Royster, 2016). This assignment is challenging and keeps students' attention. Students learn about new databases, locate

research articles and reference them in APA format, and start learning about policy processes as they explore government sources. This fast-paced, 50-minute activity requires focus and the ability to work quickly. Reflection and discussion take place later, but could be added if time permits. This format works because students benefit from displaying vested interest.

Not only is the activity graded, but it also provides the building blocks for their final project. Students learn how to search library databases for articles on a policy topic, access the Congressional and State Legislature websites to find legislation to examine for their paper, and identify excellent, trusted organizations that provide statistical information on their issues (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). The final question of the scavenger hunt asks students to synthesize and apply what they have learned by explaining the steps they would go through to examine and report on a particular policy. Estimated time: 50 minutes.

Assessment of Benefits

Our experience is that, if carefully structured with learning objectives and follow-up classroom discussions, the scavenger hunt can be socially engaging *and* cognitively challenging (see McCain, 2007). Although our observations need to be corroborated by research, we have found several benefits of using scavenger hunts for instruction and learning purposes. One benefit is that this is an active learning strategy that can be employed at the beginning of a course or module and set the tone for an active, engaged classroom environment.

In addition, if instructors are organized and strategic, the data students are assigned to gather becomes content that can be referred to throughout the semester and these connections are likely to increase students' overall comprehension. Also, content and skills from the scavenger hunt can prepare students to complete later assignments by taking them through previously unexplored databases and reliable and reputable websites. Finally, scavenger hunts can expose students to new sources of information they can use in other classes, as well as help them develop knowledge and skills for use in their later professional work.

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Submitted by:
Jennifer A. Jones, Suzanna Smith and Melody Royster
University of Florida, Gainesville