



## Six Lessons Learned in Mentoring Student Research

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For three or so years now, my students in the Communication 280 course, Communication Research Fundamentals, have completed significant group research projects — focus groups, surveys, and content analyses mostly. They've completed applied research projects for various organizations or explored basic research questions about human communication.

Some findings my students and I have found over the course of a few years of research:

- Nearly 60 percent of students acknowledge using their smartphones — of those that have them — during class even when it isn't time to do so.<sup>1</sup>
- The term phone is growing dated among students: talking on their mobile phones is now only the fourth-most-popular thing students do with their phone — after social media, texting, and tools like calendars and reminders.<sup>2</sup> (Don't quote me on this because I can't find the reference ... but my memory tells me that some students say they watch Netflix in class.)
- Students spend, on average, an hour and a half per day consuming social media.<sup>3</sup>
- Despite the amount of time spent on social media and texting, there is limited or no data suggesting that the more time students say they spend on social media correlates inversely to what they say their grades are.<sup>4</sup>
- That having been said, 25 percent or so of students personally believe their use of mobile devices has affected their academic performance.<sup>5</sup>
- Students on this campus are nearly as likely to use their phones as their "e-Reader" as they are a Kindle.<sup>6</sup>
- Students prefer printed books to e-books, however, when they read.<sup>7</sup>
- Students on this campus struggle knowing much about the country around them. While every student can name the president of the United States, only about one in four can identify the nation's second-most powerful politician: Speaker of the House John Boehner.<sup>8</sup>
- Beyond that, just more than one in 10 students (13 percent) can identify one (not all nine) member of the United States Supreme Court. A similar percentage can name their personal representative to Congress from their home district.<sup>9</sup>
- Only 7 percent know the mayor of Rexburg is Richard Woodland.<sup>10</sup>
- Social media is changing relationships. Thirty percent of BYU-Idaho students say they would say things in texts that they would have trouble saying face-to-face.<sup>11</sup>
- Students have learned about important organizations on campus: for example, students wishing to deal with Financial Aid prefer dealing with people face-to-face rather than interact electronically.<sup>12</sup>
- Only just more than one in four students is aware the library will check out a Kindle to them.<sup>13</sup>
- Oh, and this: Scouters who attend the Island Park Scout Camp tend to think the bathrooms there need a little attention.<sup>14</sup>

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## Of the now dozens of projects in Communication 280, I have learned something from each one, often something fascinating.

Communication 280 is an introductory course however, many students come into the course with a misunderstanding of what research is. Those students sometimes think research is using Google or crafting a term paper. They use words like “boring” and “difficult” to describe research. Furthermore, many lack basic skills in Excel with which to evaluate data, and others lack understanding of the basic concepts and vocabulary of research.

To be successful, therefore, I need to teach students basic skills while guiding them through a semester-long research project. This project daunts me at times, but when I watch their smiles and see the beauty of their finished posters, the outcomes please me. They become basic communication researchers and begin to know the importance of research to their future careers. They begin to develop the key skill of taking information, analyzing it and using those analyses in a well-presented fashion to persuade or to inform.

Students do either a basic research project or an applied one. For the basic research project, they look at a question that relates to communication theory. I have seen a project about media framing of the Native Americans. I have seen a project about how word choice affects the perception of advertising effectiveness. Others have looked at social media, texting, and technology and their influences upon our interconnected world.

Those who do an applied research project find an organization or I find one for them. I don't force those doing applied research to do a communication-related project — I just ask them to use a survey or a focus group or depth interviews to help an organization learn something they wished they knew. Students have researched e-books for the library. They've looked at Center Stage publicity. They've examined video webcasting of University athletics events. They've looked at Scouter satisfaction with the Scout Camps in the Grand Teton Council.

I don't pretend that my course is perfect, but I have been pleased with the outcomes of this major project. Students collaborate in groups, learn what a scientific paper looks

like, analyze findings, state those findings clearly and present them in an actionable way. Along the way, they learn a bit about communication theory and about software tools too.

My students present three things at the end of their project: A scientific poster, a scholarly paper and an in-class presentation. They present the posters at the University's Research and Creative Works Conference. I advocate the conference because as my students present, it helps them interact with judges and see other research going on. I believe it helps their confidence and provides the reward of having people seeing their work. They learn to communicate. After the conference, they present a longer, oral presentation to the class. Guests come sometimes. Those presentations are formal – about 10 minutes. They finally turn in a paper to me – following the traditional format of an academic paper, abstract, background, methods, findings, and conclusions. These papers are usually designed at a high level, as would be expected from communication students, and make solid contributions.

Here are a handful of lessons I have learned through mentoring research:

### LESSON 1: Go ahead and take class time to mentor.

I meet with my students about four times a semester as teams during class time. We discuss what their project is. We talk about best methods. We talk about problems. We provide specific guidance about how and when to study. This kind of project can be hard because some have a strong idea of what they are doing already, but most groups need guidance.

In a class where students don't necessarily understand the difference between a focus group and a survey as they begin study, I can't wait until they understand these differences and other core concepts before they begin to get University approval, gather data, and present their research. I have to mentor in such a way that they can learn as they go and do. So, regular group meetings and space for lots of questions and dialogue really help.

## LESSON 2: Use individual grades for group work.

This is new for me. I have long resisted the idea of having individual grades on group projects. I think groups rise and fall together, not as individuals, in the work place. However, I also believe in research and listening. My growing sense is that students wish to evaluate one another — to have the ability to stop a malingerer from bringing them all down. They tire of carrying the load unfairly.

So, I have decided to provide the opportunity to use individual grades, as appropriate, in this group project. Here is what I do:

- I created a small questionnaire in Qualtrics. Each group fills out a different survey with the same questions.
- The questionnaire first looks at the evaluation of the group as whole. If the group says it worked well together and all, more or less, did the same amount of work, then each group member will receive the same evaluation on the elements of this project.

- Second, the team evaluates each group member on individual contributions. The paper asks for students who are unusually helpful or who caused some problems.
- Third, the group members try to evaluate themselves. They tell me what they did and if they thought they carried their own load. If their assessment looks less than the rest and if the group dynamic is bad, I can lower – or raise – one or two people's grade.

## LESSON 3: Be very specific about expectations and provide examples.

Students who have never done a research project before rightly feel nervous about expectations. Besides regular mentoring, I provide a detailed rubric of expectations and as many examples as possible – other student papers or professional examples.

I also create a pair of readings about expectations and then give an open-book quiz on those readings at the beginning of



the semester. I hang excellent posters in the classroom to show students good work. I provide professional and student examples of papers.

One problem I found early on involved demonstrating a good literature review. Most student papers in those early semesters lacked substance and relevance to their research questions — they were too broad. So, I worked to find clear, excellent examples. I found one especially good professional paper that I began to share as “the example.” Since then, I have noted student papers improving. Now, I also have student papers to use as examples of effective literature reviews.

#### LESSON 4: Try to find partners with whom to do research.

Many students do excellent work doing basic research, but I think some of the more useful projects come when either students or I find an organization with which to partner. Recently, we did studies for the Grand Teton Council. It was the first time in years that the local Boy Scout council had done any research about how satisfied adult Scouters were with the Boy Scouts of America’s local Scout camps. Students developed questions, examined the academic literature about the Boy Scouts and about camping. They did excellent work and provided useful analysis directly to BSA.

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### LESSON 5: Research can be messy.

Students will make mistakes. Projects will get sidetracked. Groups will stumble. These are things you can expect in an environment of original research. However, when you work closely with the groups, you can help them change direction. You can help them focus on findings they have, rather than what they originally wanted. You can tell them whether to do a regression analysis or a T-test.

### LESSON 6: Help students focus on their “big question.”

I have now mentored dozens of groups and hundreds of students on final projects. So, I have gained a little insight about how to discuss projects with them. As I remember learning from Elder Bednar, learning to ask good questions is key to effective learning. So, as I mentor, I ask my students: “What are you researching? What is your “meta-question?”” As students learn to articulate their central question, we focus on the next question: How will you answer that? In so doing, I can shape the research or help students find answerable questions. This may well be the most important lesson I have learned.

So, as you mentor students with their research, you will learn many things, and so will they — even if the most important finding is about an outhouse in the Island Park Scout Camp. ❁

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup>McCann, M., Adams, B., et. al., Smart Phones in the Classroom?, paper for Communication 280, p. 8.
- <sup>2</sup>Davis, C., McDiarmid, S., et. al., What Affects the Brand Image of Smartphones Among Students at BYU- Idaho?, paper for Communication 280, Winter 2014, p.5.
- <sup>3</sup>Fischer, R. Shelley, S., et. al., Social Media and Self-Image, paper for Communication 280, Winter 2014, p. 7.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 9.
- <sup>6</sup>Tangiora, R., Erkman, A., et. al., David O. McKay Library, Printed Books vs. E-Books, paper for Communication 280, Winter 2014, p. 6
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 5.
- <sup>8</sup>Unpublished data, survey conducted by Lane Williams, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup>Craven, A., Ray, B., et. al., Does Texting Affect the Different Relationships of Young Adults? Paper for Communication 280, p. 17.
- <sup>12</sup>Allen, D., Bennett, S., et. al., Financial Aid Office, paper for Communication 280, Winter 2014, p.5.
- <sup>13</sup>Tangiora, p. 7
- <sup>14</sup>Derrick, B, Holove, V., et. al., Island Park Scout Camp; BSA Research Project, paper for Communication 280, Winter 2014, p. 8.