

Emily M. Boyd

Capstone Project Spring 2008
Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Introduction

For my capstone project, I was interested in developing student's research skills. Many discussions in the department this semester have centered on problems associated with student writing and their ability to summarize and understand research and report on it in a clear and scholarly way. To address these concerns, I have implemented a research paper component in my SOC 200 Foundations courses. The Foundations course serves to orient students to the discipline of Sociology, the Sociology major here at MSU, and the research and writing skills the student will need throughout their undergraduate collegiate work. In this report, I will discuss the research paper that I developed and implemented in the course, as well as strategies I have utilized in pursuit of addressing some of the writing concerns voiced by faculty in the Sociology and Corrections department.

Implementation

I integrated both research papers and presentations into the course, introducing them to students through a handout (see Guidelines for Research Papers and Presentations handout, below). My aim is to familiarize students early on in their educational experiences with the process of conducting a scholarly literature review, what constitutes appropriate sources, how to integrate information in a clear and concise way, and how to properly cite sources using ASA citation style. Additionally, through completing this assignment, students attempt to achieve some the aim of Goal 9 of the Sociology Program Goals, which states that "Students will acquire the communication and collaborative skills necessary for the effective presentation of sociological analysis to diverse audiences, including peers, faculty, groups, organizations and the general public."

In addition to requiring a research paper and presentation, I wanted to truly aid students in crafting their research and writing skills. To facilitate this goal, I required all students to turn in a first draft of their work 2 weeks before the final draft was due. I gave all students detailed, line by line comments on their work, offering solutions for how to structure inadequate sentences, guiding them on using proper citations, and generally aiding in the development of their papers. I decided I would attempt a new method for giving students feedback this semester: instead of giving written comments, which can become messy and hard to interpret on the page, I asked students to submit their work via the online D2L dropbox and gave them comments utilizing the track changes function in Microsoft Word. Most students did submit their papers through D2L, although I did tell them I would accept paper copies if they preferred that medium. Track changes allows one to demonstrate how to change a sentence by doing so within the word document, insert comments about the student's work, and show how to use proper citations within the student's paper. I saw two advantages to implementing track changes: first, I would save myself (and my hands) from writing messy comments to

students, and second, I thought the format would have advantages to students, such as more detailed feedback on their work and ease of making changes to their drafts.

Student Assessment of Using Track Changes

After giving students comments on their first drafts in track changes, I wondered what their experiences had been utilizing this new format for written assignments and feedback on their work. I designed a survey within our D2L course to inquire about their experiences (see survey below). Out of 45 total students across the two sections of Foundations I am teaching this semester, 30 responded to my calls for participation in this voluntary survey. From the survey, I found that most students had used the D2L dropbox to submit their papers, most had done so before in other courses, and those who had not used the dropbox previously did not have a hard time learning the procedure. Most (19 students, or 63%) had not used track changes before, and the majority (56%) said they didn't have a preference between receiving track changes or written comments on their work. An overwhelming majority reported that they liked using the drop box because it saves them paper (86%) and because it saves time (83%).

Student comments about the usefulness of track changes were mixed. 21 students, or 70%, agreed that track changes make it easier and less time consuming to edit their work, while 3 students disagreed that track changes made editing easier, and 6 were neutral or had no opinion about the usefulness of track changes in those ways. Perhaps most important to me was question 10, which asked if students agreed, disagreed, or were neutral about the following statement, "I like getting comments in track changes because I feel I get more detailed comments on my work from the instructor." 16 students (53%) agreed with the statement, while 13 (43%) did not perceive a difference, and 1 student disagreed that track changes provided more detail. Only 3 students reported disliking reading instructor comments from the computer screen. The majority (56%) recommended that I strongly encourage, but not require, students to submit papers online via the D2L dropbox for similar papers in the future.

Instructor Reflection and Assessment

Overall, I feel that using track changes to give students feedback on their work was a successful strategy. I did feel that I was better able to guide students in learning how to write about social research in a scholarly way, even though it was more time consuming to provide electronic comments. From the survey, I learned that students prefer submitting their work through D2L, although student response to the comment system was varied. I was pleased that 70% of students felt that track changes made it easier and less time consuming to edit their work, although I was somewhat surprised only 53% agreed that they received more detailed feedback from the instructor. I had initially thought that more would positively report increased attention to detail—although I am happy that more than half of the students that responded to the survey felt they received more attention than they normally do with written comments. As a teacher, I am always excited to find new strategies that I can use to aid students in improving their work. I will continue to offer traditional print submissions and written comments for those students who have preferences for those methods.

Foundations of Sociology
SOC 200
Spring 2008
Guidelines for Research Papers and Presentations
Final Papers are due in class Friday, May 2

For this class, students must complete a scholarly research paper that is worth 25% of their final grade. This library research paper (or secondary research paper) is comprised of three parts: the first draft (worth 25 points), a presentation of the material (worth 25 points), and the final paper (worth 50 points). Each piece is addressed below.

Research and Topics

The goal when doing any scholarly paper that reviews the previous work of experts in the field is to outline the major *research* that exists on any one particular topic. By *research* I mean studies conducted by professionals within their field—NOT just general information that you might find when doing a Google search or reading a newspaper article (see “references” below for more details on what constitutes research). For this class, you need to pick a topic that can be examined sociologically, investigate the scholarly work that exists on the subject, and then craft and organized summary of your findings into a proper paper (see organization below). You can choose just about any sociological topic for your paper BUT you must clear your topic with me before you get started. I ask that you do this so that I can make sure your topic is appropriate (which benefits you in the long run). This can be an informal process—let me know what your topic is by mentioning it to me before or after class, or by stopping by during my office hours.

Information Sources

In your research paper, you should have **AT LEAST SEVEN (7)** references in your paper to *scholarly* work on the subject. You can additionally include one or two internet or newspaper articles (such as out of the Star Tribune or The New York Times) if you wish, but *at least* seven of your references *must* be to scholarly journals (such as the Journal of Contemporary Family Studies, Social Forces, American Sociological Review, etc) or scholarly non-fiction books. Journals outside of the discipline of sociology that are relevant to your paper are also appropriate to use as citations (for instance, if you were researching the effect of corporal punishment on children, many psychology journals may hold relevant information). See me if you are unsure if a resource is considered scholarly.

Length and Formatting

All papers need to be at least 7 pages in length. It is okay if your paper is a bit longer, but no paper should exceed 10 pages. Papers which do not meet the minimum page requirement will result in a reduced grade. When you write your paper, please present it in Times New Roman or Arial type, using no larger than 12pt font. Use the standard margin settings: about an inch (1.25”) on each side and at the top and bottom of the page (these are standard settings in most word processing software, such as Microsoft Word). Double space your papers and number your pages. Include a cover page that

states the title of your paper, your name, your class and section, and the date you submitted your paper. **Papers are due in class on Friday, May 2nd**. Late papers will be deducted 10 points every day they are late; no papers will be accepted after May 8th for any reason. The final draft of the research paper is worth 50 points.

Organization

You must organize your papers so that they will present the information in a clear, coherent way. You **MUST** use subheadings (like the ones in bold in this document) to organize the flow of information you are presenting. This is standard in academic writing—look at any of your scholarly sources—you will find the information the authors are presenting organized around subheadings. I recommend you using the following outline to format your papers:

Introduction: Introduce what your paper is going to discuss. Sociological papers aren't like mystery novels; there shouldn't be a "surprise" at the end—we should know from reading the introduction the topic of the paper and what research debates/issues it will cover. (*typically 1 page in length*)

Body/Substantive Sections: Here you should lay out the findings of your research, using subheadings. For instance, if I did a paper on the effects of corporeal punishment, I might have one section on research that showed "positive" effects (or at least, non-detrimental effects), one heading and section of "negative" effects, etc. Don't label the sections "body." Label them using the concepts and research topics that will be discussed within them. (*this is the bulk of your paper, should be around 5 pages*)

Discussion/Conclusion: What do you conclude after having read several studies on your topic? Is there a "clear cut" conclusion (do most studies find the same thing?) or is the issue still up for debate or interpretation? What is your overall assessment of the research? (*typically 1 page in length*)

References

Your paper should utilize ASA style citations within the text and you should list all resources that you cited within the paper on a page subtitled **References** at the back of your paper. The reference page does not count as one of the seven required pages of your paper. See the ASA style guide or the citations reference sheet I handed out in class (also on D2L) for information on how to properly cite your sources.

First (or Rough) Drafts

Students are required to turn in a first or "rough" draft of their research paper on April 14th. First drafts should be virtually complete; they should meet the required length and be a good representation of the student's efforts to complete the full assignment. The purpose of submitting a first draft is to get feedback from the instructor on the content of the paper, formatting and organization, citations, grammar and spelling, and overall research and writing performance. Boyd will read these rough drafts and give each student a grade on the first draft of the paper as it stands (worth 25 points), as well as comments and suggestions for improvements that should be made before the final draft is submitted on May 2. **When submitting their final papers, students should also re-submit their first draft with Boyd's comments.**

Grading

How I will grade your papers:

- a. Does the author exhibit an understanding of the topic at hand? Does s/he review relevant sociological literature surrounding the topic and present this information in an organized fashion, as outlined above?
- b. Has the author properly cited appropriate journals relevant to the topic at hand?
- c. Is the paper coherent and exhibit college-level writing skill, free of spelling and grammatical errors?

Presentations

Each student will give a 10-12 minute presentation on their research paper topic to the class on the date assigned (ranging from April 21-May 2). The goal of the presentation is to educate your classmates about your research question and the information that you uncovered while doing your research. Students are encouraged to use visual aids (like power point, handouts, or videos) and other creative, innovative or interactive presentation techniques to keep things interesting. Your presentation may cover a broad spectrum of research, telling others about the variety of sources you reviewed for your paper, or you may take a more focused approach, telling us about one particular study (its central questions, methodological approach, and findings) that you found interesting. Students are encouraged to introduce the class to current events (for example, newspaper articles) or video clips (a short 2-3 minute clip of a TV show or movie) that relate to the research they reviewed. Students can earn up to 25 points for their presentation, detailed below:

Presentation Length 5 points

Make sure your presentation is *at least* 10 minutes.

Organization 5 points

Students should organize their presentations in a clear, coherent way so that the audience understands their research questions, what they found, and the connection between any visual aids and the research at hand.

Preparedness 5 points

Students should come to class on time, ready to begin their presentation on their assigned day.

Creativity 5 points

Add some flair whenever possible to the presentation to keep things interesting for your audience. Consider using media (videos, movies, music, power point) to keep things fresh.

Sociological Relevance 5 points

Ask yourself, “What does this have to do with sociology or the social world?” Students should clearly connect their research questions and topics with sociological issues and concepts.

Instructions

Overall results from all attempts for all users for this survey are displayed to the right.

Research Paper Survey - Survey Results

Manage Surveys
 Question Library
Survey List
 Edit Survey
 Survey Reports
 Survey Results
 Preview Survey

Has Start Date
 April 28 2008 Now **Search**
 Has End Date
 May 5 2008 Now

Overall Results

30 attempts have been completed

Information

Instructions: Please answer the following questions about submitting the first (or rough) drafts of your research papers. The results will remain anonymous, meaning your answers will not be associated with your name or identity. Thank you!

Question 1

Did you submit your first draft of your paper online to the D2L dropbox?

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|-----------|
| Yes | | 30 (100%) |
| No (skip to question 12) | | 0 (0%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 2

Had you used the D2L dropbox before in another course?

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|-------------|
| Yes (skip to question 4) | | 25 (83.33%) |
| No | | 5 (16.67%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 3

If this was your first experience using the D2L dropbox, which of the following best describes your experience?

| | | |
|---|--|---------|
| Figuring out how to submit my document was difficult; I had trouble | | 0 (0%) |
| Figuring out how to submit my document was okay; after a few minutes I was successful | | 2 (20%) |
| Figuring out how to submit my document was easy; I had no trouble | | 8 (80%) |

Number of Responses: 10

Question 4




Before this assignment, had you ever received comments from others on your work using Track changes in Word?

| | | |
|--|--|-------------|
| Yes | | 10 (33.33%) |
| No | | 19 (63.33%) |
| I've used track changes before, but I had not ever gotten feedback on my work in track changes | | 1 (3.33%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 5

Which of the following best describes your feelings about getting comments in track changes?

| | | |
|---|---|-------------|
| I prefer getting comments electronically in track changes over written comments |  | 12 (40%) |
| I don't have a preference between track changes and written comments |  | 17 (56.67%) |
| I prefer getting written comments over electronic track changes |  | 1 (3.33%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Information

For the next few questions, please indicate if you agree or disagree with the statement provided:

Question 6

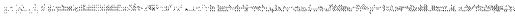


I like submitting papers to the dropbox because it saves me paper.

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------|
| Agree |  | 26 (86.67%) |
| Disagree |  | 1 (3.33%) |
| Neither agree nor disagree (neutral) |  | 3 (10%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 7

I like submitting papers to the dropbox because it saves me time.

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------|
| Agree |  | 25 (83.33%) |
| Disagree |  | 1 (3.33%) |
| Neither agree nor disagree (neutral) |  | 4 (13.33%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 8

I like getting comments electronically in track changes because it makes it easier to edit my work.

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|----------|
| Agree |  | 21 (70%) |
| Disagree |  | 3 (10%) |
| Neither agree nor disagree (neutral) |  | 6 (20%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 9

I like getting comments electronically in track changes because it is less time consuming to edit my work.

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|----------|
| Agree |  | 21 (70%) |
| Disagree |  | 3 (10%) |
| Neither agree nor disagree (neutral) |  | 6 (20%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 10

I like getting comments electronically in track changes because I feel I get more detailed comments on my work from the instructor.

| | | |
|-------|---|-------------|
| Agree |  | 16 (53.33%) |
|-------|---|-------------|

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------|
| Disagree | | 1 (3.33%) |
| Neither agree nor disagree (neutral) | | 13 (43.33%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 11

I dislike reading comments on the computer screen

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------|
| Agree | | 3 (10%) |
| Disagree | | 20 (66.67%) |
| Neither agree nor disagree (neutral) | | 7 (23.33%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Question 12

After completing this first draft assignment, what would your recommendation be for future courses that have similar paper requirements?

| | | |
|---|--|-------------|
| Students should be required to submit papers online to the D2L dropbox | | 5 (16.67%) |
| Students should be strongly encouraged, but not required, to submit papers online to the D2L dropbox | | 17 (56.67%) |
| Students should be told they have two options: they may either submit their papers online to the D2L dropbox or in paper form | | 8 (26.67%) |
| Students should be strongly encouraged, but not required, to submit paper copies of their research | | 0 (0%) |
| Students should be required to submit paper copies of their research | | 0 (0%) |

Number of Responses: 30

Information

Please answer questions 13 and 14 if you did not submit your paper online. For those who did use the drop box, please skip to question 15.

Question 13

If you did not submit your paper online to the D2L dropbox, which of the following best describes why? (select all that apply):

| | | |
|--|--|---------|
| I did not have access to a computer at home | | 0 (0%) |
| I wanted to get written comments because I prefer them to electronic comments | | 0 (0%) |
| I was unfamiliar with track changes and did not want to have to learn new software | | 0 (0%) |
| I dislike reading comments from the screen | | 0 (0%) |
| Other reasons not listed | | 3 (10%) |

Question 14

If you did not submit your paper online to the D2L dropbox, would you consider doing so in the future?


| | | |
|--|--|--------|
| Yes, if I had a similar assignment I would submit my | | 0 (0%) |
|--|--|--------|

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------|
| paper online | | |
| No, I would submit a paper copy | 0 | (0%) |
| I'm not sure | 3 | (100%) |

Number of Responses: 3

Question 15

Do you have any additional comments about using the D2L drop box or the feedback you received on your work? Please list them below.

 [Expand Responses](#)

Number of Responses: 7

Information

Thank you for your comments! They are greatly appreciated!