Effectiveness of asynchronous humanities instruction

Lisa Ellison

BITE 6750: Contemporary Issues in Business and Information Technologies Education

Dr. Patricia J. Slagter van Tryon

April 10, 2024

EFFECTIVENESS OF ASYNCHRONOUS HUMANITIES INSTRUCTION

At East Carolina University (ECU), a large public regional land-grant university in rural eastern North Carolina, student demand has driven an increase in the number of general education humanities courses offered asynchronously. At the same time, I sense, from interactions with colleagues on campus and academic conferences, a fear that online humanities instruction will destroy humanities' disciplines.

The primary aim of this study is to determine whether asynchronous humanities courses do or can lead students to gain knowledge in critical thinking about language, argumentation, history, culture, and other goals toward which humanities education is aimed. It begins with an attempt to define three to four broad goals of humanities education (Helm, 2000). Then, the ECU general education humanities outcomes are evaluated against these broad goals of humanities education. ECU's general education humanities student learning outcomes ("humanities outomces"), created by the General Education and Instructional Effectiveness committee (GEIEC) of the Faculty Senate, are a set of student learning outcomes all courses that receive general education humanities credit must align with. Each year, humanities designated courses in different disciplines report on the sucess of students in meeting the learning outcomes. The university's Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research division receives the reports and carries out program assessment. This primary aim is further informed by research comparing asynchronous and face-to-face instruction (Crawford, 2010 and Zeng, 2023).

Before offering a thorough analysis of ECU's humanities assessment results, the study examines trends in course delivery offerings in the university and the college of arts and sciences, where most of the general education courses are taught. It characterizes the differing needs and expectations of two distinct student populations who may enroll in asynchronous

courses: primarily face-to-face students who sometimes take an online course, and distance education only students.

Context

Pressure to offer more online sections has left many humanities faculty questioning the direction of their programs. Their discomfort can be reduced to two signficant areas: fear for the survival of humanities majors in their departments, and fear that the educational value of humanities content is diminished. Instructors observe that in-person classes are more likely to yield new majors than online courses are. In an environment where many humanities departments have seen a decline in majors, about fourteen percent between 2012 and 2018, according to data from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Palmer, 2023), and that given a choice, as IPAR data shows, many on-campus students prefer their humanities courses online, moving to greater reliance on online classes is seen as a necessary move, but one that poses an existential threat to livlihoods, departments, and disciplines. Secondly, it is a disciplinary assumption that sound humanities education requires human interactions that allow for a free-flowing exchange of ideas and modeling of lines of argumentation (Bakhurst, 2021), and that any other method is a pale imitation.

The preference for online humanities courses coincides with a significant demographic shift in students' educational expectations (Stoddard, 2011). The "enrollment cliff" precipitated by lower birth rates 18 years ago (Kline, 2019), pushing the university to seek out non-traditional student populations, exacerbates the enrollment problems already plaguing humanities departments.

Attempting to change the nature of students' preference for professional programs is futile, so humanities faculty stand to make the greatest difference to their disciplines by working

practically: analyzing their goals and considering how to effectively deliver instruction to the students they have, rather than those they wish they had (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Traditionally, humanities instructors hold up small, in-person classes as the ideal environment for their courses (Bakhurst, 2021 and Helm, 2000) for good reason: small classes sizes allow for engaged instructor-guided discussions involving interpretation of complex and challenging material, and the slow work of writing and reading essays; in-person learning offers an easier platform for the kinds of exchanges that make effective methods for humanities instruction (Crawford, 2010).

Value and Relevance

This study addresses concerns that are much discussed, albeit anecdotally, in faculty meetings, hallways, and department-wide email threads. It arms faculty with information and, hopefully, some optimism for the challenge of effectively revising their courses for online delivery. While the data used to conduct the study is specific to ECU, the pressures on humanities education are common to many other humanities departments in the United States (Beck, 2023).

<div align="center">

Problem Statement

</div>

In analayzing humanities assessment reports, several questions can be answers. Is asynchronous instruction in the humanities effective? Specifically, at ECU, is there a difference in student achievement in the humanities outcomes between face-to-face (synchronous or in-person) courses and asynchronous courses?

Initial questions to consider regarding ECU general education humanities include whether it is possible to tell to what extent instruction is equivalent in face-to-face and asynchronous courses. Are the materials, activities, pacing, assessments, and syllabuses the same? Are they adjusted for their format? Based on demographics such as age, yearr, and major,

what patterns can be identified between face-to-face and asynchronous learners at ECU. In what ways are the populations of online and face-to-face courses comparable? In what ways are they distinct? What percentage of on-campus students chooses to take humanities, and other general education courses, online? Are there trends in majors or colleges?

Literature Review

The following resources begin to address the questions: how do asynchronous sections compare in general education assessment of humanities at ECU? What is humanities? What are the challenges of assessing humanities instruction? What are the traditional ideals of humanities instruction? What special considerations need to be made in creation and assessment of humanities courses delivered online? How can (and should) the traditional ideas of humanities instruction be revised in light of online course delivery?

A comparison of the assessment data of humanities courses offered in synchronous and asynchronous formats (Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research [IPAR], 2024) at East Carolina Univeristy [ECU] can provide a simple yes or no answer to whether asynchronous instruction is currently as effective as synchronous instruction in leading students to achieve the humanities outcomes, but whatever the findings, a fuller picture of humanities outcomes and further considerations for online instruction will help ensure educational standards for humanities instruction remain high.

Before the more complex question of whether asynchronous instruction of humanities content is effective can be fully answered, it is helpful to try to define "humanities" to arrive at a clear idea of what is being assessed. The definition should be accurate and meaningful, offering a broad scope: what is humanities in general; and a narrow scope: what is the specific meaning of "humanities" in the context of ECU. This definition can be created through evaluating the

description given by the National Endowment of the Humanities ([NEH], 2024), a study on assessment of humanities (Helm, 2020), and ECU's General Education Humanities statement and outcomes (GEIEC resources, 2024). The NEH, an independent federal agency created in 1965, and one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States, elects to list examples of areas of humanities study rather than attempt to define the group (NEH, 2024; also observed by Mann, 2000). Helm's 2020 study comes from the author's work on a committee to create humanities learning outcomes, work which began by establishing a broad definition and goals for the diverse humanities disciplines. At ECU, there are three student learning outcomes (GEIEC resources, 2024) with which an instructor of any humanities course, whether literature, philosophy, history, or other discipline, is expected to align their course activities.

Once an accurate picture of humanities at ECU has been derived, issues of humanities assessment can be examined. In 2000, the journal *College Teaching* released a special issue (Volume 48, Issue 3) on "Assessing the Humanities." Each of the three articles explores a different aspect of humanities assessment. Dallinger and Mann (Dallinger & Mann, 2000) present the results of a student survey. Helm (2000) relates the process he participated in on his own campus to create humanities outcomes, explaining the decisions the committee made and the questions that led to them. Mann (2000) identifies difficulties of humanities assessment and offers a manual for assessment of the humanities in general education. While these three sources alone provide a thorough and diverse account of humanities assessment, it is important to consider the possibility of updating these researchers' findings in light of the twenty-four years that have transpired since the time of the publication. To establish a more complete sense of the context of humanities at ECU, the university's approved student learning outcomes (GEIEC resources, 2024) can be analyzed with regard to the issues presented in the *College Teaching*

studies (Dallinger & Mann, 2020; Helm, 2020), and recommendations for revisions to the outcomes can be made.

Traditional ideals of humanities instruction including teaching cozy, discussion-rich classes are on display in Helm (2020) and Bakhurst (2021), and are a strong presence across faculty in many humanities disciplines based on hallway conversations, conferences, and online forums. Bakhurst's essay (2021) is a response to an essay critical of online instruction published by the same author just as the pandemic was sending students home from in-person classes. In it, the author identifies some benefits the mode offerswhile holding fast to the traditional conception of what is required for sound humanities instruction; namely, in-person interactions.

The reality of the situation, however, as made clear in the Quality Matters and Eduventures report on their survey of chief online officers at higher education institutions of varying sizes broken into three tiers of online enrollment (Garrett et al., 2023), and by data from the ECU's data dashboard, specifically within, though not limited to, the College of Arts and Sciences, where the humanities disciplines reside (IPAR data, 2024), is that student interest in asynchronous education is rising. The educational landscape has moved beyond asking whether humanities faculty have the leisure to ask whether their courses should be prepared for online instruction, as Kline's (2019) findings in a human resources in higher education trade magazine on the looming enrollment cliff shows us. The more productive question is how to create an effective online humanities course.

Crawford's (2010) study on shifting teaching and learning in humanities for the digital age highlights the need to revise the philosophical framework for teaching humanities for online instruction by intentionally creating learning environments. Examining who current students of online instruction are is a valuable activity to help instructors understand the audience of their

courses, and Stoddard and Schonfeld (2011), in their comparison of student performance in comparable online and in-person classes help us understand some differences in these distinct student populations. Zeng and Luo's (2023) meta-analysis of effectiveness in online learning identifies how various factors influence online learning. Bringing these articles together provides powerful evidence for typical differences between online and in-person learners, how to best address the specific needs of different learning poplulations, and why this should be a matter of critical concern to faculty. Goldrick-Rab and Stommel's (2018) essay on teaching in the a higher education trade magazine further explores the idea that faculty members stand to make the greatest difference to their disciplines by analyzing their goals and considering how to effectively deliver instruction to their actual students, rather than hypothetical or ideal students from their own educational pasts, perhaps. Skallerup Bessette's (2020) advice column on whether a "transformative" humanities course can be taught online offers a starting point of considerations for facutly attempting to deliver what Palmer (2023) identifies as a body of perpetually valuable instructional content in an online format.

Methodology

This qualitative conceptual analysis has three primary areas of focus: general education humanities assessment at East Carolina University (ECU), the broad goals of humanities instruction, and asynchronous learning and teaching. The purpose of the study is to:

1. Interpret outcomes assessment data concerning the effectiveness of asynchronous general education humanities courses at ECU. (Goal 1).

2. Evaluate the general education humanities student learning outcomes at ECU. (Goal 2).

3. Revise general education humanities outcomes, consult with a faculty workgroup, and propose them to all ECU faculty for adoption. (Goal 3).

Data Collection

Information required to carry out goal one (to interpret outcomes assessment data concerning the effectiveness of asynchronous general education humanities courses at ECU) includes demographic information publicly available on ECU's data dashboard and the office of Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research's assessment data on general education humanities courses. Existing studies comparing asynchronous and face-to-face learning help guide intepretation of demographic and assessment data.

Practices, policies, definitions, essays, and studies from ECU, academic journals, higher education publications, and the National Endowment for the Humanities provide a broad basis and robust context for a rich evaluation of ECU's exisiting general education humanities student learning outcomes (goal 2). The outcomes revision for general education humanities courses at ECU (goal 3) futher builds on the evaluation (goal 2), resulting in a set of appropriate, meaningful, and functional outcomes to present to a faculty workgroup for further revision, followed by presentation to the faculty at large for approval.

Method of data analysis

Conceptual analysis is frequently used in philosophical scholarship but is also useful for questions of application (Audi, 1983). Conceptual analysis involves aiming to understand, define, and analyze a concept or phenomenon using inductive and deductive reasoning and using counterexamples, often hypothetical cases, to test hypotheses (Horvath, n.d.). Petrina (2016) offers an outline and examples of conceptual analysis, with "conceptual analysis" being the concept explicated. A challenge of this method: "There is no easy and systematic introduction to conceptual analysis" (Horvath, n.d.).

Conceptual analysis techniques employed in this study include identification and comparison of relevant and compelling data; close reading; concept clarification; categorization; and semantic, logical, historical, and contextual analysis.

Statement of Ethical Considerations

Information that personally identifies students whose scores are part of the assessment data is not available. There is no risk of individual students being identified through this study. There is no potential for harm from this study.

Conclusion

This study brings together important information and findings to aid in creating effective online humanities courses. The thorough analysis of goals, assessment data, and student demographic information presented here identifies two key elements for effective instruction: a realistic view of the learner and targeted student learning outcomes.

References

Audi, R. (1983). The applications of conceptual analysis. *Metaphilosophy*, *14*(2), 87–106.

    https://www.jstor.org/stable/24435398

Bakhurst, D. (2021). *Après le déluge*: Teaching and learning in the age of COVID. *Journal of*

    Philosophy of Education, 55:621–632. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12616

Beck, K. (2023, June 14). The humanities aren't hurting everywhere. *Inside Higher Ed*.

    Retrieved February 18, 2024 from

    https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2023/06/14/humanities-arent-hurting-

    everywhere-opinion

Crawford, C. M. (2010). Instruction in the humanities: shifting teaching and learning

    expectations and tools within the digital age. *The International Journal of the*

    Humanities, 8(2), 229-244. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9508/cpg/v08i02/42861

Dallinger, J.M., & Mann, K.B. (2000). Assessing student knowledge of and attitudes toward the

    humanities. *College Teaching*, *48*(3), 90–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550009595821

Garrett, R., Simunich, B., Legon, R., & Fredericksen, E. E. (2023). CHLOE 8: Student demand

    moves higher ed toward a multi-modal future, the changing landscape of online

    education, 2023. Quality Matters and Encoura Eduventures Research.

GEIEC charge (2024). General Education and Instructional Effectiveness (GEIE) at East

    Carolina University. Committee charge. Retrieved February 18, 2024 from

    https://www2.ecu.edu/facultysenate/charge/fc.pdf

GEIEC resources (2024). General Education and Instructional Effectiveness at East Carolina

    Univeristy. Committee resources. Retrieved Mar. 12, 2024 from

    https://facultysenate.ecu.edu/general-education-committee/

Goldrick-Rab, S., & Stommel, J. (2018, December 10). Teaching the students we have, not the

    students we wish we had. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved February 18,

    2024 from https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-the-students-we-have-not-the-

    students-we-wish-we-had

Helm, T. E. (2000). What are you assessing? General education and the humanities curriculum.

    College Teaching, *48*(3), 90–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550009595820

Horvath, J. (n.d.). *Conceptual analysis: about this topic*. PhilPapers.

    https://philpapers.org/browse/conceptual-analysis

IPAR Assessment (2024): Instutional Planning, Assessment, and Research at East Carolina

    University. (2024, February). Assessment outcomes, general education humanities

    [Unpublished raw data].

IPAR Data (2024): Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research at East Carolina University.

    (2024, March). Courses [Data set]. https://ipar.ecu.edu/power_bi/courses/

Kline, M. (2019, Fall). The looming higher ed enrollment cliff. *Higher Ed HR Magazine*.

    Retrieved February 18, 2024, from https://www.cupahr.org/issue/feature/higher-ed-

    enrollment-cliff/

Mann, K. B. (2000) You can herd CATs: assessing learning in the humanities. *College Teaching*,

    48:3, 82-89, https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550009595819

NEH (2024). *About the National Endowment for the humanities*. The National Endowment for

    the Humanities. Accessed March 12, 2024, from https://www.neh.gov/about

Palmer, K. (2023, November 1). Debunking perceptions about value of humanities degrees.

    Inside Higher Ed. Accessed February 18, 2023, from

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2023/11/01/humanities-majors-make-more-workers-without-degrees

Petrina, S. (2019). *Methods of analysis: conceptual analysis*.

https://www.academia.edu/39292085/Conceptual_Analysis

Skallerup Bessette, L. (2020, July 9). Can you teach a 'transformative' humanities course online? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Accessed January 27, 2024, from

https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-you-teach-a-transformative-humanities-course-online

Stoddard, H. A., & Schonfeld, T. (2011). A comparison of student performance between two instructional delivery methods for a healthcare ethics course. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 20(3), 493–501. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0963180111000181

Zeng, H., & Luo, J. (2023, April 25). Effectiveness of synchronous and asynchronous online learning: a meta-analysis. *Interactive Learning Environments*.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2023.2197953