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Student Learning in High-Impact Practice Mass Communication Courses

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Abstract

College and university high-impact practice (HIP) courses involve students in intensive values-focused learning inside and/or outside of the traditional classroom environment. Much research has documented that participation in HIPs increases student retention and graduation rates. At the same time, the nontraditional learning structure of an HIP course can complicate a thorough assessment of student learning. Anecdotal evidence reflects strong involvement in HIPs by mass communication programs, although communication efforts in this regard are not as well documented in the literature as efforts in other fields. This essay briefly defines HIPs and presents an appropriate theory that would guide HIPs in theory and practice within mass communication. The essay then affirms the relevance of HIPs within mass communication and offers recent successful examples. The essay closes with an overview of student learning assessment strategies that would be relevant and applicable within mass communication HIPs.
Introduction

Higher education administrators and faculty members are increasingly embracing the idea of the high-impact practice course (HIP). HIPs put students in circumstances that “demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters” over an extended period of time (Kuh, 2008, p. 24). George Kuh is an internationally recognized expert on the subject who recommends every university student participate in at least two HIPs, with at least one occurring in the student’s senior year (Kuh, 2008). Kuh and other experts identify HIPs as critical to support student learning and generate graduates with the knowledge and skills most desired by professionals in a variety of fields.

HIP courses appear to be common in higher education mass communication programs. This may be because of the close relationship between the mass communication curriculum and expectations for practice in the real world workplace. Mass communication HIPs can involve student media organizations such as a student newspaper or broadcast station, performance-based courses revolving around theater or debate programs, campaigns courses, internships, student-run agencies and so forth.

Mass communication faculty members see value in HIPs but may have difficulty managing student learning and performance in HIPs, for three reasons. First, mass communication HIPs typically involve much student autonomy, such as that experienced in a student-run communications agency, student newspaper, or broadcast operation. A high level of autonomy makes it more difficult for the faculty member to directly influence students. Student autonomy also complicates the
assessment of student learning. Second, HIPs that involve real world experiences typically involve students working directly or indirectly for an internship provider or client. These external authorities can be poor models for professionally appropriate student practice because they can view student work more as ‘getting the job done’ than as ‘learning.’ (The author has experienced situations where clients pushed students to take professionally inappropriate actions, as well as situations where clients acted unethically and expected students to follow suit.) Finally, even though HIP courses involve a high level of interaction between students and faculty, students often hesitate to inform faculty when strategic challenges are encountered or student team members are acting negligently.

This essay is offered to add to existing literature on HIP issues relevant to mass communication. The essay begins by defining HIPs. It presents a theory of communication that works well to support development of interpersonal relationships relating to HIPs. The essay then presents key arguments for the advancement of HIPs within higher education in general and mass communication in specific. The essay ends with examples of specific HIPs in mass communication and recommendations for assessing student learning within HIPs.

What are high-impact practice courses?

High-impact practice courses put students in circumstances demanding a high level of thoughtful action, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making. HIPs allow students to connect learning with the types of realities that will be presented in the workplace. In his extensive report on HIPs for the Association of American
Colleges & Universities, George Kuh (2008) listed ten curricular and co-curricular areas in which HIPs can be found:

- First-year student seminars and experiences
- Curriculum with a common set of core experiences or theme
- Learning communities
- Writing-intensive courses
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Undergraduate research
- Diversity / global learning
- Service learning / community-based projects
- Internships
- Capstone courses / projects

Many of these categories overlap, of course. It should also be noted that a HIP could also come about through the virtual classroom. Engaged, active online learning has also been identified as a high impact practice (Wright, 2008).

Ultimately, the goal of a HIP course is to “increase student engagement and success” (Kuh, 2008, p. 13). This aligns with the five desired clusters of outcomes of the undergraduate experience overall, as listed by Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh (2002): The development of educated persons; the development of skilled workers; the development of democratic citizens who are engaged with public life; the fostering of interpersonally sensitive individuals; and the development of life skills that allow students to manage their responsibilities in society.
Since the 1970s, experts have called for higher education to focus more on the actual demonstrations of learning that graduates need to be able to demonstrate for employers (Guskin & Marcy, 2002). HIPs allow students to demonstrate this learning. It is also true that, as with any course, “students seem to get out what they put in” and “may remain disengaged from the process despite the best efforts of their faculty” (Brogan, Gilles, & Woodard, 2014, p. 13). HIPs are a good answer for engagement but are not a cure for everything that is wrong with the relationship between university students, institutions, and learning.

What is a relevant theory to use in explaining and developing HIPs?

A theoretical framework is always valuable to allow us to integrate theory, research, and practice. In regard to HIPs and student learning, use of an appropriate theory can bring about “a shared understanding of the value and means” of student learning (Banta & Associates, 2002, p. 85). A theoretical framework that works well to do this is Gudykunst’s Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management Theory.

William Gudykunst was an internationally known expert on multicultural communication who wrote 28 books and more than 200 articles on the subject. Using other theories as a starting point, Gudykunst developed Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management Theory to help explain how people deal with anxiety and uncertainty in a new communication situation. It’s an ideal theory to link to HIPs.

Applying AUM allows us to improve the quality of communication so people adjust to new cultural expectations (Gudykunst, 1998). It lays out uncertainty and anxiety as interdependent dimensions that influence intercultural adaptation (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Bruschke, 1998). It allows for understanding of

Although AUM was intended to focus on interpersonal communication scenarios, it is a relevant theory in this case because HIPs can engender a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty both for faculty members and for students. Faculty members may feel they don’t have the expertise to teach a HIP or the time to carry out its many responsibilities that go beyond lecturing and testing. Students may feel unprepared for the demands of a HIP course; students may also be uncomfortable with the teamwork that often accompanies HIP learning.

When applied, AUM can help faculty and students address communication at four levels: Individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and cultural:

- **The individual level** is the level at which people create and interpret communication messages.

- **The interpersonal level** is the level at which people exchange messages and work together.

- **The intergroup level** is the level at which people collectively exchange messages – and where social identities and collective self-esteem are involved.

- **The cultural level** is the level at which we can witness people communicating similarly or differently across cultures.

Developing a successful HIP, like any successful training program in any workplace, involves communication, collaboration, and reduction of anxiety and uncertainty among participants at all levels (Gudykunst, 1998). It would necessitate
that participants understand their ability to reduce uncertainty, manage anxiety in an environment with new challenges, and adapt to new cultural expectations. Clearly, this is what’s required of everyone involved with HIP courses – particularly if faculty haven’t been involved with teaching outside of the ‘lecture and test’ curriculum model and have no experience implanting true hands-on learning.

Ni and Wang (2011) found universities could successfully use AUM strategies to help international students reduce their levels of anxiety in organizational situations involving conflict. There’s no reason why the same ideas Ni and Wang identified as relevant for international students could not also apply to all students in the context of HIPs. In fact, in the conclusion of their article, Ni and Wang recommended testing the model “in a variety of domestic samples” (2011, p. 295).

Managing anxiety with strategies consistent with AUM requires people to become mindful of the situation. Mindfulness is a valuable characteristic in any workplace. Becoming mindful involves drawing new distinctions between ideas. It involves continuous creation of new ideas, openness to new information, and an awareness of multiple perspectives (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). All of this keeps participants in any communication situation focused on the present. “It also makes us more aware of the context and perspective of our actions than if we rely upon distinctions and categories drawn in the past” (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p. 2). These ideas would be quite relevant in HIP courses.
Why are HIP courses so desirable within undergraduate higher education?

The organizational paradigm under which most colleges and universities have traditionally worked is one of *instruction* rather than *learning*. Higher education institutions are organized into bureaucracies with programs and policies that support the efficient delivery of information to large groups of people – rather than individual student mastery of important concepts and skills (Tagg, 2003).

In this instructional paradigm, a large proportion of college students are physically present but psychologically absent. Tagg cites a ten-year study in which 40% of high school students surveyed said they did not pay attention teachers or make significant effort to learn (2003, p. 41). There’s little reason to believe these attitudes don’t persist and even worsen by the time students arrive in college.

It’s no surprise that employers are consistently unhappy with the knowledge and skills of entry-level workers. A recent study focusing on communication educators reached the conclusion that educators are not as proactive as they need to be in finding out about the realities of the workplace and how undergraduates need to prepared (Moody & Bates, 2013). In the workplace, many professional communicators in particular “are not convinced that educators are teaching students the communication skills they need to effectively work in today's industry” (Todd, 2009, p. 80).

Another report, drafted under the supervision of the American Association of Colleges & Universities, referenced more than 800 interviews conducted with small business leaders and CEOs in 2006. The report concluded that executives believe “real world application of knowledge” was critical. (How should colleges
prepare...2006, p. 2). Only 22% of the business leaders surveyed supported a primary focus on knowledge and skill in a specific field. A broad range of knowledge and skills was seen as more important.

What these and other studies tell us is that the traditional instruction paradigm no longer works. A new paradigm is needed – one where the purpose of instruction “is the organizing principle of our thinking and acting” (Tagg, 2003, p. 30). It would be a paradigm where students were more prepared to be creative thinkers than technical button-pushers.

HIPs do this by preparing students to think originally and creatively, in ways relevant to the real world workplace. At the same time, HIPs shift the responsibility for learning from the institution to the students themselves (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004).

Why are HIP courses especially relevant in mass communication?

In 2009, it was reported that more than 70 percent of the U.S. 2009 high school graduating class was enrolled in college the following fall (Rampell, 2010). This represents the largest proportion of college freshman enrollment since record keeping began in 1959. In the higher education environment generally, and in mass communication specifically, faculty members are continually presented with higher performance expectations, more students, and fewer supportive resources.

A 2006 study found mass communication faculty members reported being overwhelmed, overworked, and struggling to keep up with the discipline (Swanson, 2006). In recent years, higher education budgets have continued to decline. Freezes in faculty hiring have been common (Becker, Vlad, & Kalpen, 2012; Becker, Vlad, Desnoes, & Olin, 2009). HIPs help academic programs deliver learning opportunities
that students need in ways that are potentially efficient and expedient. For example, instead of teaching students about a broadcast station – students can run one. Instead of teaching students about an advertising agency – a class can be set up to model an agency, with real world clients. Instead of teaching students about media communication in other countries, students can go to other countries and participate in that communication.

HIPs resonate well with college students who are increasingly less interested in theoretical concepts and more interested learning the hands-on skills needed to be graduated into the workplace. In 2013, it was reported that 88 percent of incoming college freshmen said they were going to college was “to get a better job” (Grasser, 2013, p. 28). “The ability to make money” is also at an all-time high.

Research into the inspirations of communications undergraduates showed “students who study strategic communication are motivated more by profits” while students who study journalism are more motivated by a sense of altruism (Crawford, Fudge, Hubbard, and Filak, 2013, p. 113). Understanding student motivations, something that could occur with student-faculty interaction in HIP courses, could help instructors “adjust the students’ expectations earlier in their academic careers” (p. 114).

HIPs are relevant in mass communication because they often include students creating communication to engage “with a real, not a pretend, audience” (Lent, 2012, p. 105). Lent contends that this engagement can inspire students to do better work.
HIPs provide a compelling response to employers’ complaints about poor concept knowledge and skills among mass communication graduates. In one study, a majority of employers surveyed said students would acquire more valuable learning from an internship than in the classroom (Gaschen & Swanson, 2014). In 2013, Moody and Bates acknowledged longstanding complaints from PR specialists that educators were “not quickly updating PR curriculum by teaching students how to use new technologies that are emerging in the industry” (2013, p. 169). Moody and Bates recommended wider implementation of “projects that encourage real-world experiences and collaboration with peers” (p. 178).

Todd (2009) recommended new curricula “that merge writing skills, higher order cognitive skills, and new media technology capabilities in a single course instead of teaching students these important lessons through detached courses” (2009, p. 83). This recommendation is not inconsistent with what an HIP delivers.

What are some successful examples of HIP courses in mass communication?

A literature search resulted in surprisingly few articles about HIPs in mass communications in comparison to the number of articles about HIPs in other disciplines. Here are a few noteworthy examples of mass communication HIP courses profiled in recent published literature:

• At Kentucky State University, a historically black institution, students in an oral interpretation speech course analyzed letters written between slaves and former slaves in the 1800s. “Student feedback revealed that the class enjoyed the project, learned more about the antebellum era in America, and
found a new interest in their own family histories” (Brogan, Gilles, & Woodard, 2014, Abstract).

- Students in an Iowa State University mass communication theory course were taught using a team-based learning approach. By semester’s end, students showed significantly higher levels of concept knowledge (Han & Newell, 2014).

- Instructors at Tarleton State University grouped undergraduates from several different communications courses via Facebook. Students posted original content, made writing suggestions, critiqued each other’s work, and made inspirational suggestions. Instructors said students engaged in the online community; course learning outcome goals were reached (Maben, Edwards, & Malone, 2014).

- Indiana students enrolled in a mass communication research course partnered with a public television station. The students designed a research effort and then went about collecting and analyzing data profiling the station’s audience. In so doing, students developed strategic planning and research skills while interacting with a real-world client (Bonell, 2010).

- Leslie Steeves published a profile of a successful overseas internship program offered by the University of Oregon in Ghana, West Africa. “In five short weeks, our students had profound life-altering experiences, with outcomes a function of several factors, including where each student began relative to their awareness of other cultures, the kinds of relationships they developed, their personal initiative, and their reflection on their experiences.
In addition, they all used their media skills in ways that went beyond any classroom assignment,” Steeves wrote (2006, p. 360).

- In California, the Newport Beach Film Festival has a special category for films made by students in seven nearby universities. Students in a California State University, Fullerton undergraduate communication event management course design and conduct the promotional outreach for the festival (Collegiate showcase, 2014).

- In 2008, Public Relations Quarterly published a summary of the “learn by doing” successes of a student-run public relations agency (Swanson, 2008).

In 2014, a conference paper detailed multiple methods of assessment of student learning in a similar agency environment (Swanson, 2014).

HIP courses in communications and other disciplines have the potential to be successful when students and faculty realize that learning doesn’t exist as a stand-alone, objective concept. Students’ ability to grasp information and gain meaning from it emerges from inquiry, and is influenced by personal perspective, social and emotional development, life experience, worldview, and other variables. There is seldom a “single truth” about any situation, even though there can be agreement on information accuracy (See Fried, 2006).

What are some common ways to assess student learning in HIP courses in mass communication?

Appropriate assessment of student learning is critical in higher education, because assessment allows academic programs and the faculty members teaching within them to determine whether goals for student learning are being met.
“Assessment inspire us to ask these hard questions: ‘Are we teaching what we think we are teaching?’ ‘Are students learning what they are supposed to be learning?’ ‘Is there a way to teach the subject better, thereby promoting better learning?’” (Why is assessment important, para. 1, 2008).

Driscoll and Wood (2007) make the critical observation that teachers do not learn from their experience of teaching. Rather, teachers learn from reflecting on the teaching experience. Assessment of student learning provides the opportunity for teacher reflection that would not be available if universities and programs didn’t endeavor to find out what students learn and how they are learning it.

As noted at the outset of this essay, assessment can be challenging in HIPs because of the high level of student autonomy typically involved, client relationships that may or may not support the curricular goals and values of the teaching faculty member, and student hesitancy to report challenges or problems that need to be addressed by the faculty member. Still, there are established practice standards that guide learning assessment. If followed, these standards will go a long way toward reducing uncertainty about what students have learned in a HIP course and how they learned it.

Faculty members need to work together to develop a systematic, objective program that allows for “authentic assessment” (Allen, 2004, p. 8). Evidence of student learning collected for analysis should be consistent with what professionals in the student’s discipline would encounter. “Collect enough evidence to feel reasonably confident you have a representative sample of what your students learned and can do. The sample should be large enough and representative enough
that you can use the results with confidence to make decisions about your course or program” (Suskie, 2009, p. 47).

Every academic program needs “clear and specific learning outcomes and a clear link to the mission of the campus” (Borrego, 2006, p. 13). Every academic program course needs a syllabus that “informs, supports, and is aligned with learning outcomes” (Driscoll & Wood, 2007, p. 229). On the syllabus, outcomes are “the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students take with them from a learning experience” while course objectives are “the tasks to be accomplished” or, what students will do in the course (Suskie, 2009, p. 117).

Examples of direct evidence of academic performance that align with quantitative analysis include:

- Results of national standardized testing
- Results of localized or in-course standardized testing
- Results of course pre and post-testing

Examples of direct evidence of academic performance that align with qualitative analysis include:

- Embedded common assignments, essays, and course activities
- Student presentations including oral performances, speeches, and interviews
- Student-created projects and portfolios
- Faculty members’ paired reflection reviews of student work and/ or performance

Indirect evidence of student learning can be gathered, although indirect evidence is subject to interpretation that may or may not be accurate. Indirect
evidence may be collected through surveys asking students to self-assess their performance, surveys asking students to assess the performance of other students on work teams, or surveys asking employers to rate students’ individual or collective knowledge or work quality. A similar strategy involves the use of competence interviews with employers allowing for “direct assessment of some student skills, such as oral communication, critical thinking, and problem solving” (Allen, 2004, p. 101).

Multiple measures are always best. And, in fact, multiple measures of assessment can provide a ‘work around’ for faculty members struggling to fairly evaluate autonomous students, faculty who are yoked to problem clients, or faculty who are beset by students who won’t report problematic teammates.

In the student-run advertising and public relations agency supervised by the author, a rubric establishes a baseline for performance evaluation. Student learning and performance is then evaluated in a number of different ways, each from a different perspective (Swanson, 2014):

- Student team member performance evaluation, ranking and comments
- Individual student reflection survey, with open-ended comments
- Instructor quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Co-instructor quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Graduate teaching assistant quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Client quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
• Time management software tracking data of student time invested in client projects and tasks

• Tracking data of student access of curriculum information and client documents via online classroom management system and cloud file sharing

These multiple measures allow thorough review and analysis of student knowledge gain and hand-on performance. In the end, students get more feedback on their work in the agency than they are likely to get in their first job. All of these measures would be directly applicable, or applicable with modifications, in other types of HIP courses.

Conclusion

High-impact practice courses have been around a long time, and are receiving growing attention a higher education environment that is changing from being driven by tradition to being driven by results. The mass communication discipline would seem to be a leader in HIP, although the literature search for this essay resulted in surprisingly few articles about HIPs in mass communications.

This essay presented a brief review of some of these HIP successes that have been documented. The essay also offered suggestions for student learning assessment that can overcome the inherent challenges of HIP courses. Teacher/scholars in the discipline should be encouraged to continue expanding the range of HIP courses in mass communication, while publishing more about these courses and the student learning that they bring about.
References


   Available at: [http://works.bepress.com/dswanson/51/](http://works.bepress.com/dswanson/51/)


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High-Impact Practice

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• Writing-intensive courses
• Collaborative assignments and projects
• Undergraduate research
• Diversity / global learning
• Service learning / community-based projects
• Internships
• Capstone courses / projects
Relevant Theory

• Gudykunst’s Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management Theory
  – Allows adjustment to new cultural expectations
  – Recognizes anxiety and uncertainty as independent issues
  – Allows communication to be addressed at individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and cultural levels
Assessment of Learning in HIPs

• Challenging to document, because of:
  – Faculty limitations and student autonomy
  – “Real world” clients and projects – procedural and ethical issues and challenges
  – Strategic challenges (clients, teams, etc.)
Recommendations – Direct Assmt.

• Pre & Post-tests of knowledge and/or performance
• Embedded common assignments
• Student project or portfolio
• Faculty member paired reflections
• Review/critique by outside professionals
• Review/critique by client
Recommendations – Indirect Assmt.

• Student self-assessment
• Student assessment of team member(s)
• Employer assessment of student readiness
In Any Assessment Situation...

- Establish reasonable benchmarks for performance
- Use consistent rubrics to gauge success
- Make students aware from the outset of your expectations for performance
- Make sure students have the resources to allow performance goals to be met
In Any Assessment Situation...

- Use direct and indirect assessment strategies
- Seek multiple measures / multiple perspectives on student learning *in the aggregate*
- Balance quantitative and qualitative
- Include concept knowledge + skill demonstration
- Keep it a peer-involved process
- Never link assessment with faculty performance
- Always “close the loop” → *program improvement*
More Research is Needed

• Publish more examples of successful mass communication HIPs
• Offer descriptions of successful assessment plans / methods for mass communication – in HIPs and elsewhere in the curriculum
• Assessment is a faculty-driven process – how are we communicating about it and working together to do it?
• More guidance is needed for ACEJMC and CEPR-affiliated programs
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