**Mentored Teaching Project**

**Kelsey Earle**

**In Accordance with the Certification of College Teaching Program at**

**Michigan State University**

**Introduction**

Many new college students have little to know experience using the American Psychological Association (APA) formatting and reference style when writing academic papers. However, in many fields (including communication) we expect our students to use APA formatting and reference style. This poses several problems. First, many instructors do not have the time to correctly teach APA to their course. A brief overview may be provided, but many lecturers simply do not have the time to adequately spend teaching APA. Therefore, how can we expect our students to correctly use a style they have little-to-no experience using, if we cannot teach it to them ourselves?

This research report reflects a mentored teaching project conducted in accordance with Michigan State University's *Certification in College Teaching* program for graduate students. An APA template was designed to address undergraduate student's lack of knowledge regarding APA style and formatting. This template was used in weekly writing assignments for a large lecture course in the department of communication. Average grades were compared between pre- and post-introduction of the template to determine its impact on student grades. Additionally, the subjective experiences of the teaching assistants (TAs) were taken into consideration. Results showed grades significantly decreased from the fall 2018 to spring 2020 semesters. However, subjective reports from the TAs indicated that the templates improved their grading experiences and helped maintain a feeling of consistency while grading. In order to understand the implications of the study, first a brief examination of the different types of assessment are explained. This is followed by a description of the learning goals, learning objectives, teaching goals, and teaching objectives for the assessment. The methods, results, and discussion of the study conclude the research report.

**Types of Assessments**

There are two major types of assessment in the education literature: formative and summative. There are also four other types of assessment including diagnostic, norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and interim assessments. This section briefly describes each of these types of assessment and concludes with the assessment rationale for the current mentored teaching project.

"Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics" (Popham, 2008, p. 6). Popham (2011a) gives five potential applications for formative assessment: 1) To make an immediate instructional adjustment, 2) To make a near future instructional adjustment, 3) To make a last-chance instructional adjustment, 4) To make a learning tactic adjustment, and 5) To promote a classroom climate shift. Usually, formative assessments are low stakes assignments worth few to no points. Examples include asking for understanding in the classroom or practice problems. Formative assessments may be spontaneous or planned depending on the classroom's needs and the learning and teaching goals set by the instructor (Dixon & Worrell, 2016).

Summative assessments are "cumulative assessments ... that intend to capture what a student has learned, or the quality of the learning, and judge performance against some standards" (National Research Council, p. 25). Generally speaking, summative assessments are high stakes, graded, assignments or exams. Examples include entrance exams, final projects, or final exams. These assessments generally come at the end of a learning sequence.

Some have argued that many learning activities are not focused on student learning and competency, but instead on assigned benchmark and content coverage particularly in a

technology-filled educational environment (Guerrero-Roldán & Noguera, 2018). In short, they

may be too focused on either formative or summative goals. Additionally, summative and

formative assessments are not comprehensive enough to cover all the varying assessment types.

As such, at least four other types of assessment have been identified: diagnostic, interim, norm-

referenced, and criterion-referenced assessment.

Diagnostic assessments assess a student's knowledge or understanding about a topic

*before* the topic is presented in class (Seipel, Biancarosa, Carlson, Davison, 2018). These

assessments help students consider their current knowledge on a topic and are useful for

instructors in knowing the students' baseline knowledge. Norm-referenced assessment is

conducted when student's performance is compared with a larger group (e.g., a national

standard, previous courses, etc.; Dunn, Morgan, O'Reilly & Parry, 2004). Criterion-referenced

assessment measures the student's work against an objective or standard (Burton, 2006).

Usually, a grading rubric is used as the criterion used in assessing students' assignments or

exams. Lastly, the interim (sometimes referred to as benchmark) assessment evaluates the

student's performance periodically throughout a learning session (e.g., semester or school year;

Perie, Marion, & Gong, 2009). Generally, the scores from the interim assessments are predictive

of summative assessments. In short, they are the building blocks that help students practice

concepts or ideas that they will encounter on an exam or final project.

All the different types of assessments are important in their own way. However, if the

instructor does not understand the reason or motivation for the specific assessment it may not

have the intended effect in the classroom. This is to say, *instructor assessment literacy* is a

requirement (Popham, 2011b) for effective assessment implementation. Instructors should

choose an assessment that best fits the learning goals and objectives they have set for the course,

while also facilitating the most positive and engaging student learning. This is a large challenge for even the most seasoned instructor. As such, assessment type and assessment literacy were crucial in determining how I could best improve scores on the weekly assignments.

Since I had noticed a large number of APA formatting issues during the fall 2019 semester, I thought that providing APA resources and practice would facilitate this skill and improve student grades. In this teaching project, interim assessments were used in the form of weekly assignments. The assignments called, *Communication in the Real World,* generally asked students to reflect on the week's material and write a one-page reflection paper. The reflection paper was supposed to be written in accordance with APA style and formatting guidelines (Times New Roman, 12-point font, 1-inch margins, double spaced, etc.) and exceed the minimum page requirement of one page. If APA formatting or the page requirement were not adhered to, students would lose points from that week's assignment. Students would also lose points for things like incorrect or irrelevant responses. Any plagiarized work received a 0 and was reported to the instructor of record and/or the university.

These assignments reflect interim assessments as students were tested on their knowledge regarding the learned material for the lesson. While they were given some freedom to apply the terms to their own lives in the way they chose, they were assessed on their ability to correctly apply those terms. All of the weekly assignments compounded and were reflective of the types of questions posed in the midterm and final exams (summative assessments).

In summary, interim assessments were used in this teaching project. Specifically, a change in the format of the interim assessment (the APA template) was used in an effort to improve students' knowledge regarding the lesson materials as well as to improve grades on the weekly assignments. The following section describes this project in more detail.

**Project Design**

COM 225 provided a good opportunity to introduce the APA template as there were already weekly assignments in place (i.e., the previously discussed interim assessments). As such, the following learning goal was proposed:

**Learning Goal 1:** Students will write thoughtful one-page reflections that meet all the assignment criteria, specifically APA formatting

In order to meet these learning goals, students had the following objectives in regard to the weekly assignments:

**Objective 1:** Utilize the assignment template in order to meet formatting and length expectations (APA, minimum of 1 page)

**Objective 2:** Engage with each week's prompt to write a thoughtful reflection that correctly addresses that week's topic

It is important to recognize that the classroom environment is not solely students. In fact, large lectures such as COM 225 include the instructor(s) of record and teaching assistants. As such, a teaching goal was made for the instructors involved with the course:

**Teaching Goal 1:** Provide opportunities for students to practice using APA in weekly activities

Several teaching questions were also important to the implementation of the APA template. Once again, both the students and the instructors had their own relevant teaching question.

**Teaching question for students:** When provided with an APA template, will students be able to correctly write in APA and meet page length requirements for all one-page writing assignments throughout the semester?

**Teaching question for instructors:** When students are provided with an APA template, will grading become more consistent and efficient?

In summary, these goals, objectives and questions guided the implementation and utilization of the APA template within the weekly assignments. The ability for students to learn the material and submit a correctly formatted response paper that was reflective of their knowledge of course content was the main goal. However, a secondary goal arose when considering the impact an APA template could have on a grading process, particularly for teaching assistants.

**Method**

The APA template was used during the spring 2020 course for COM 225. The APA template was available on D2L alongside the relevant assignment. Two versions of the template were provided. In the first version, example text was used to illustrate what the student assignment would look like upon completion and included clear instructions for APA style and formatting requirements. A second template was also provided that was only set up with the APA formatting requirements built in (Times New Roman, size 12 font, 1" margins, double spaced, etc.). Students could use either template to write their weekly assignment but were asked to delete any extraneous information (such as the instructions and example text) if they used the first template.

In order to compare the effects of the APA template on student success, grades were compared between the fall 2019 and spring 2020 semesters. The APA template was not used in the fall 2019 semester, and the assignments were more or less the same through both semesters. Interviews and self-report were used to understand the grading instructors' subjective experiences with the APA template.

**Results**

While the grades themselves were not anonymous at the time of grading, all data in this report has been anonymized. Only average scores will be reported, and no identifying information will be provided. Approximately 227 students were enrolled in the fall 2019 semester and 412 students were enrolled in the spring 2020 semester. The fall 2019 semester was taught by Dr. Amanda Holmstrom and work was graded by TA Kelsey Earle. The spring 2020 semester was co-taught by Dr. Amanda Holmstrom and Dr. Brandon Van Der Heide and included two TAs, Kelsey Earle and one other individual.

In order to test the impact of the APA template on course scores, the average grades from fall 2019 and spring 2020 were compared. An independent sample $t$-test was conducted. There was a significant difference between the fall 2019 ($M$=8.44, $SD$=1.7) and spring 2020 ($M$=8.12, $SD$=2.05) semesters ($t(638) = 1.99$, $p = .007$).

As previously mentioned, the teaching assistants in charge of grading for the spring 2020 semester included myself and one other TA. Having graded the assignments with and without the APA template, I found them to be very helpful in terms of consistency. I felt as though fewer students were trying to be "sneaky" by adjusting their formatting in order to meet the page requirement. In the fall 2019 semester, a large portion of the submitted assignments would change margins, add unnecessary spacing, or use obtrusive headers (e.g., name date, course title, etc.) in order to meet the page requirement. As many academics and college instructors can attest, it is very clear to see when someone adjusts these things. Speaking from experience, it can even be frustrating! It is difficult to give full points for an assignment when half the page is filled with unnecessary headers and titles or the margins are adjusted to half the paper size.

The other TA for the course also found the APA template to be helpful. In an email correspondence they stated, "I do feel it makes grading easier, because it standardizes the

assignment and makes the evaluation criteria obvious/straightforward. Given a large class like ours, it allows us graders to get through assignments quickly, especially for the type of assignments we have (almost pass/fail)."

The other TA also noted a few difficulties regarding the APA template by stating, "One small concern I had was that students may not understand the reason we provide such template. Some students may think we are overemphasizing the format issues. Instead, we are actually focusing on the content/quality. The length is required because it is what's needed to thoroughly answer all questions, etc. In our case, length is approximately equal to the quality of work." This is an important contribution and will be examined further in the next section.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The integration of the APA template into a large lecture format was met with mixed success. From a quantitative standpoint, negatively significant differences in grades emerged. With the addition of the template, students' grades decreased. However, from a more qualitative standpoint the instructors who graded the assignments found them to be helpful.

One major consideration regarding the results of this comparison is COVID-19. During the spring 2020 semester, all courses moved online in mid-March (shortly after spring break). As such, there may be a lot of noise within the results of the comparison. COVID-19 dramatically changed the manner in which lectures were presented, the types of assignments that could be completed, and the interactions with students. In order to understand the potential impact of COVID-19 on this project, a post-hoc test comparing only scores from the first half of the semester was conducted. An independent sample $t$-test with this sample still provided significant results ($t(637) = 2.64$, $p = .034$). There was a significant decrease in scores from the fall 2019

($M$=8.78, $SD$=1.74) and spring 2020 ($M$=8.35, $SD$=2.12) semesters. However, the difference between the fall and semester scores was smaller than when comparing the entire semester.

This indicates that some of the decrease in scores may have been altered by the disturbance in learning. On one hand, instructors may have been more lenient regarding due dates and quality of the assignments. On the other hand, students may have struggled with the transition and failed to submit assignments or turned in work that was up to their normally high standards. Additionally, there were almost double the students in the spring 2020 semester than in the fall 2019 semester. A large occurrence of low scores could bring the mean down and skew the scores. Therefore, the results should be taken with this context in mind. It is possible that the APA template had more of an effect than could be quantitatively determined and could be re-examined in future semesters when instruction is fully face-to-face once more.

As mentioned previously, the TA for COM 225 recognized that students may not have understood the reason for the APA template. Students may have interpreted the APA template as a focus on formatting rather than on content. Instead of one page of quality work that responded to all of the posed questions in a comprehensive manner, students may have worked harder to meet formatting and page requirements. This is an important contribution and should be explained to the students at the start of the semester when first covering the syllabus and course materials. Rather than simply providing a page requirement, the APA template gives students the opportunity to practice using APA. The assignments themselves are also designed so that one-page is the minimum required in order to accurately and comprehensively respond to the questions of the assignment.

To address this problem a new type of assessment could be used. Instead of interim assessments, the *Communication in the Real World* assessments may be a better learning tool as

a criterion-referenced assessment. This is to say, a grading rubric might be helpful for students as they could review the grading criterion while preparing their submissions. Perhaps a mixture of both interim and criterion-referenced assessment would be the path forward to meet both learning and teaching objectives for a large course such as COM 225. If students had a grading rubric, complete with APA specifications, and had to complete the weekly assignments perhaps students would both learn the material better and score better on the assignments.

These distinctions and clarification are helpful beyond the scope of COM 225, and into any course that has minimum page requirements for their assignments. Many instructors struggle with understanding the type of assessment that best fits the needs of their course, particularly when they have over 200 students in attendance. The APA template was simply one suggested way of improving learning and scores.

**Conclusion**

In summary, an APA template was used to help students practice using APA in their weekly assignments. It was expected that student grades on the weekly assignments would improve with the addition of the template. TA impressions of the template were also considered. While grades decreased after the APA template was introduced, TAs reported liking the template and seeing the value in having them in a large lecture format. Results indicated the importance of explanation of the template considering formatting is tertiary to the main goal of knowledge and comprehension of course material. There are always new and innovative ways to help students learn. This is one practical example that had pros and cons. I believe a formatting template is a step in the right direction but has plenty of adaptability to help students and instructors in any mode of instruction.

# References

Burton, K. (2006). Designing criterion-referenced assessment. *Journal of Learning Design*, *1*(2), 73–82.

Council, N. R. (2001). *Classroom Assessment and the National Science Education Standards*. https://doi.org/10.17226/9847

Dixson, D. D., & Worrell, F. C. (2016). Formative and Summative Assessment in the Classroom. *Theory Into Practice*, *55*(2), 153–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1148989

Dunn, L., Morgan, C., O'Reilly, M., & Parry, S. (2003). *The Student Assessment Handbook: New Directions in Traditional and Online Assessment*. Routledge.

Guerrero-Roldán, A. E., & Noguera, I. (2018). A model for aligning assessment with competences and learning activities in online courses. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *38*, 36-46.

Perie, M., Marion, S., & Gong, B. (2009). Moving Toward a Comprehensive Assessment System: A Framework for Considering Interim Assessments. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, *28*(3), 5–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-3992.2009.00149.x

Popham, W. J. (2008). *Transformative Assessment*. ASCD.

Popham, W. J. (2011a). *Transformative Assessment in Action: An Inside Look at Applying the Process*. ASCD.

Popham, W. J. (2011b). Assessment Literacy Overlooked: A Teacher Educator's Confession. *The Teacher Educator*, *46*(4), 265–273. https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2011.605048.

Seipel, B., Biancarosa, G., Carlson, S. E., & Davison, M. L. (2018). The need, use, and future of cognitive diagnostic assessments in classroom practice. In Wang, V. X. (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Program Development and Assessment Methodologies in K-20 Education* (pp. 1-23). IGI Global.