The Effect of Extra Credit Projects on Learning: A Research Note*

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This study explores the effect of extra credit projects (ECPS) on specific (paper) and general (final exam) learning. ECPS involved the demonstration of mastery of a specific course objective, using selected criminological theories to critically evaluate a current journal article. The term paper also required the application of two criminological theories to a problem. Data were drawn from a large (N = 222) criminology lecture class. The results of a multiple regression analysis indicated that completion of ECPS was positively associated with grades on the term paper but not with generalized learning. The full models explained between 20 and 40% of the variance in outcome measures.

Introduction

Research on educational issues in criminology and related fields has pursued a number of themes including faculty productivity—such as the ranking of research productivity of criminology departments and individual faculty (Cohn and Farrington 1998; Stack 2002, 2003), how to design and/or assess a curricular change such as a distance education program or adoption of supplemental instruction programs (e.g., Allen, Kolpas, and Stathis 1992; Burmeister 1996; Hodges and White 2001; Kunkel 2003; Mayzer and DeJong 2003), and descriptions of various specific techniques and innovations in teaching disciplinary classes (e.g., Bushway and Flower 2002; Congos and Schoeps 1999; Hodges and White 2001; Norman 1991; Proctor 2002; Quinn, Holman, and Tobolowski 1992; Ramirez 1997; Shepelak 1996; Situ 1997; Thorne 2000; Unnithan 1994; Vigorita 2002; Williams, Rodeheaver, and Sethuraju 1995; Wright 2000). However, there has been relatively less research done, if any, on the impact of teaching innovations and various aspects of course design on student learning in criminal

justice. That is, while many teaching techniques and innovations have been described, whether or not they have the desired outcomes, such as enhanced levels of student learning or performance, is often not known (e.g., Taylor, Anderson, and McConnell 2003; Thorne 2000; Vigorita 2002). The present study explores the impact of one particular teaching technique—the extra credit paper—on student achievement outcomes (grades). The possible impact of extra credit papers on student achievement is an unexplored area in criminological teaching pedagogy, as well as teaching pedagogy in general (e.g., Bender 1986; Bushway and Flower 2002; Proctor 2002; Thorne 2000).

Background

Three key online data bases (*Sociological Abstracts*, *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, and *ERIC*) were searched for articles on the relationship between extra credit projects (ECPS) and grades or any other indicator of student performance. The search was unable to uncover any articles on the influence of ECPS on student performance in criminology or criminal justice. The search was expanded from a concern with the influence of the specific technique (ECPS) on student performance to a general concern for the influence of any teaching technique on student performance. Articles describing various teaching approaches, teaching techniques, and teaching innovations (e.g., distance learning, more frequent quizzes, films, new textbooks, guest lectures, etc.) were reviewed to ascertain the impact of such teaching designs on student outcomes. Two different categories of works emerged from this review.

Descriptive Work

Often, articles on the possible influence of a teaching technique on student performance lack control groups (e.g., Lersch 1997; Mayzer and DeJong 2003; Situ 1997; Taylor, Anderson, and McConnell 2003; Vigorita 2002). Further, they often lack any quantitative measures of performance such as grades, student evaluations, or student attitudes concerning the teaching technique. In this body of research, the evaluation of teaching techniques on student outcome measures (which could include objective measures such as grades and attitude scales) often relies disproportionately on qualitative, subjective measures such as quotes from students praising the innovation (e.g., Lersch 1997; Vigorita 2002). For example, Lersch (1997) describes a teaching innovation where students were required to participate in community service in a criminal justice agency as part of a course requirement. She cites qualitative evidence (e.g., quotes from selected satisfied students) that the tactic was well received. However, there are no data from a control group of students who had the same course without the community service innovation. It remains unclear, there-fore, whether the amount learned by students, as measured on an objective

measure such as a final examination, was different from that in the traditional form of the course.

Evaluation Research

Another body of research seeks to evaluate teaching techniques by using outcome measures. Such research studies often employ quantitative student outcome measures and utilize control groups and/or statistical controls (e.g., Kerkman et al. 1994; Kunkel 2003; Proctor 2002; Stack and Kelley 2002). For example, Kunkel (2003) studied the impact of computer-assisted instruction on student final exam grades in criminology classes. He compared an experimental group of students in a CAI class to students in a control group (students in a traditional class without CAI). There was a statistically significant difference between groups, with the CAI-exposed students performing about 3% higher on exams than their counterparts. Proctor (2002) investigated the impact of using Excel versus SPSS software on students' knowledge of statistics at the end of a summer statistics course. Students were randomly assigned into either the Excel or SPSS weekly lab sessions. On all three outcome measures, the students in the labs taught using Excel did better than the students who were taught using SPSS. For example, the average score on conceptual knowledge was 67.33 for the Excel-taught students versus 57.91 for the SPSS-taught students.

Present Study

The present study contributes to the literature on teaching criminology by filling the gap in the literature on the influence of ECPS on student learning. While there has been research on extra credit in other disciplines such as psychology and education, it has been descriptive and has not explored the possible impact of extra credit on mastery of generalized or specific learning outcomes (e.g., Bender 1986; Kerkman et al. 1994; Thorne 2000). Kerkman et al. (1994) found that students who wrote and submitted questions for pop quizzes did better on the pop quizzes. Extra credit projects can improve students' grades or performance in ways other than by adding on additional points to course grades at the end of the course. Extra credit projects can be structured in such a way that their completion should enhance the learning of specific course objectives. Hence, students completing ECPS can be expected to have significantly higher scores than others, if all else is equal, on other assignments that are keyed to the same course objectives. In addition to learning specific course objectives, the process of doing ECPS enhances learning by engaging students in the subject matter. This captures their imagination and enhances motivation to achieve in a way that ordinary exams and assignments cannot.

Extra Credit Project

The assignment was to review a journal article from an approved list of professional journals (e.g., *Crime and Delinquency*, *Criminology*, *Deviant Behavior*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Social Problems*). Articles had to be published during the current year or the year immediately preceding the course. The extra credit paper was limited to two pages. The first page must summarize the major findings of the article, and the second page must critically evaluate the article from the standpoint of at least two of the major theories of crime reviewed in the course (e.g., anomie, biological, differential association, general strain theory, institutional anomie, social learning theory, and the general theory of crime). The students were all given the opportunity to write up to five short, extra credit papers. The students could receive a full percentage point, up to a total of five percentage points added to their final course grade, if the papers were very good. For example, if the student had a final course average of 79%, did two extra credit papers, and the papers were very good, the student would receive a grade of 79% + 2% = 81% in the course. Partial credit (e.g., .25 points, .50 points, .70 points) was given to papers that were less than very good.

Hypotheses

Student Outcome Measures

The present paper assesses the extent to which the completion of extra credit papers affected a specific as well as a general performance outcome. First, performance on the extra credit paper was hypothesized to enhance grades on the course paper, given the theory-oriented nature of both assignments. The term paper asked them to explain why they were not a criminal from the standpoint of *two major criminological theories*. Hence, the student doing extra credit papers needed to apply criminological theories in two different contexts or assignments: (1) a journal article review, including the critical application of two criminological theories to the article reviewed (extra credit papers), and (2) the context of their own existential life history on why they are (not) a criminal, applying two criminological theories (term paper). A student might also enhance his/her grade on the course term paper by using the same two theories s/he was already familiar with from the completion of the extra credit assignments. That is, the student could use the same two theories that were employed in the extra credit paper for the course term paper.

There is a second manner in which the ECP might stimulate learning. The extra credit papers might enhance grades in general. The present study hypothesizes that the students completing ECPS would become more engaged in the general subject matter of the course. This engagement would contribute to their receiving higher grades than other students on the final examination in the course.

Methodology

The sample consists of all students completing a criminology class in a large Midwestern research university during winter term, 2003. A total of 222 students completed the class.

There are two dependent variables or student outcomes measures. The first is a measure of specific learning and is the grade received on the course term paper. The grade was recorded as a percentage score from 0 to 100%. The second dependent variable is a more generalized measure of learning and refers to the grade on the final hour examination. That grade is also recorded as a percentage score. A pool of approximately 100 objective questions was reviewed for the final exam by the instructor and the five graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Questions were reworded where necessary. The final exam consisted of 45 objective questions. The grades in the class were weighted as follows: each of two one-hour exams: 20% (total = 40%), final exam 20%, paper: 20%, and section participation: 20%. The GTAs were in charge of assigning grades for the discussion sections that they supervised. Each GTA supervised two discussion sections lasting two hours each.

The key independent variable is completion of the extra credit project(s). Seventy-five of the students did at least one of the possible five ECPS. The measure of the extent of involvement in the extra credit component of the course is the number of extra credit points received. This ranged from 0 to 5.0 points. Students received partial credit for ECPS where the papers were not very good. The distribution of extra credit points was marked by a problem of skewness (skewness index = 1.13. This problem was resolved through a logarithmic transformation of the extra credit variable with one added to all values since the logarithm of zero is undefined (skewness index = 0.976).

An important control variable is the academic achievement of the student. It is possible that students with high academic achievement/motivation might be more likely than others to do extra credit and, in addition, to perform well on the final exam. That is, both the extra credit and final exam scores may be related to a third factor: high academic achievement. For example, Bender (1986) found that volunteers for extra credit laboratory experiments in psychology classes were disproportionately the students with high GPAs. To control for high academic achievement, the present study controls for grades on the first two one-hour exam. An average (in percentage scores) of the first two exams measures the degree of previous academic achievement.

Five GTAs undertook the grading of the course term paper. To control for possible variation in academic standards among the five GTAs, four binary variables were created representing the four GTAs who gave the students lower grades than the fifth. The fifth GTA (who gave the highest grades to students in her sections) is used as the benchmark category. Further, the students spent two hours a week in discussion sections led by their GTAs. It is possible that students having a particular GTA might do better (or worse) on the final hour exam to the extent that a given GTA is a better (or worse) teacher than the

other GTAs. In order to control for the teaching productivity of the GTAs, it is important to include the GTA terms in both analyses. For example, if a particular GTA is an outstanding conveyer of the subject matter, it is possible that his/her students might do better on both the paper and the final hour exam.

The Appendix provides a correlation matrix for the variables and their means and standard deviations. Ordinary least squares regression analysis is employed to assess the independent effects of extra credit on term paper and final exam grades (Neter et al. 1996).

Analysis

Zero-order Pearson correlations were largely consistent with the hypotheses (see the Appendix). For example, the greater the ECPS grades, the higher the grade on the course term paper ($r = 0.116$, $p < .05$). Further, the higher the grade on the first two hour examinations, the higher the grade on the course term paper ($r = .246$, $p < .05$). Higher grades on the first two exams were also predictive of higher grades on the final examination ($r = .614$, $p < .05$). However, the hypothesis that ECPS grades would predict grades on the final examination was not supported at the zero-order level ($r = .020$, $p > .05$). To check for any suppressor and/or spurious relationships in these zero-order findings, the analysis now turns to the multiple regression analysis.

Table 1 provides the results of a multiple regression analysis of the effect of ECPS on specific and generalized learning. Column (A) provides the results for the regression where the outcome variable is the grade on the term paper. Controlling for grades on previous exams and the other predictors, the greater the extra credit points earned, the greater the grade on the term paper. The

Table 1 The effect of extra credit on (A) course term paper grade (B) final exam grade. Multiple regression unstandardized coefficients controlling for previous grades, and graduate teaching assistant (N = 222 students). (Numbers in parentheses are standard errors; numbers in curly brackets are t-ratios)

Dependent variable	(A) Term paper	(B) Final exam
Extra credit	4.06* (1.72) {2.35}	.184 (1.67) {.110}
Grades on first two exams	.376 * (.093) {4.06}	1.05* (.090) {11.67}
GTA1	−9.64* (2.15) {−4.47}	1.10 (2.10) {.524}
GTA2	−6.73* (2.04) {−3.30}	.77 (1.98) {.392}
GTA3	−10.77* (2.08) {−5.18}	−3.56 (2.01) {−1.76}
GTA4	−10.22* (2.13) {−4.78}	1.04 (2.07) {.503}
Constant	65.5* (7.83) {8.36}	−6.30 (7.61) {−.829}
R^2	.205	.399
Adjusted R^2	.183	.382
F statistic	9.26*	23.75*

*$p < 0.05$.

unstandardized coefficient of the extra credit term (b = 4.06) is 2.36 times its standard error. The probability that this result is by chance is $p < 0.01$. The hypothesis that ECPS would improve grades on the course paper is supported. The average grade on the first two hour exam is also predictive of grades on the course term paper. Controlling for the other variables in the equation, the higher the grade point on exams, the higher the grade on the course paper. The unstandardized coefficient of the grades term (b = 0.376) is 4.06 times its standard error. The probability that this result was found by chance is $p < 0.001$. Hence, these results are consistent with the hypothesis that students who generally did well on the hour exams will also do well on the course paper. The unstandardized coefficients of the terms representing the four binary variables for the four GTAs were all significant. As anticipated, the four GTAs in the analysis gave their students lower grades than the benchmark GTA who was an easier grader. The equation explains 21% of the variance in grades on the term paper. Standardized or beta coefficients are not shown since they are difficult to interpret for binary variables.

Table 1, column (B) provides the results of the multiple regression analysis with the final exam grade as the measure of student achievement. Controlling for previous grades and the other variables, the amount of extra credit points earned was unrelated to grades on the final hour exam. However, the average grades of students going into the final exam were predictive of grades on the last exam. Controlling for the other variables in the equation, the higher the pre-final exam GPA, the higher the grades on the final exam. The coefficient of the GPA term was more than 11 times its standard error, the probability that this result was by chance is $p < .0001$. The terms representing who had the student as a GTA were unrelated to performance on the final exam. This indicates that teaching productivity differences among the GTAs, measured by final exam outcomes, were minimal. The full equation explains 40% of the variance in final exam grades.

Conclusion

Research on teaching criminology has often neglected the impact of various teaching practices and innovations on student outcomes. While teaching techniques have been the subject of much discussion, the rigorous evaluation of these techniques in terms of their actual impact on student learning has not been well studied (e.g., Lersch 1997; Shepelak 1996; Situ 1997; Unnithan 1994; Wright 2000). The present study explores the impact of one specific technique to enhance learning—the extra credit project—on both specific and general learning outcomes.

Controlling for student grade achievement on the first two one-hour exam, the completion of the extra credit assignment was significantly associated with enhanced grades on the course term paper. However, completion of the extra credit assignment did not significantly affect grades on the more general learning

outcome—the final examination. The results suggest that the influence of ECPS on learning will be maximized to the extent that ECPS reinforce the learning of specific course objectives. In the present study this entailed the ability to apply two criminological theories to new situations.

A comparison of the mean grade on the term paper between students completing at least four of the five points worth of extra credit to all others in the class found a two percentage (2.36%) point gain for the students doing the extra credit (92.75 versus 90.39%). This gain is similar to the size of the gain reported for some other teaching techniques. For example, Kunkel (2003:92) reports that students in criminology classes with CAI scored, on average, 2.62% higher in the course compared to a control group of students in traditional classes lacking CAI (mean grades were 80.1 versus 77.48, respectively). Hence, the gains in learning associated with innovations in instructional techniques may at times, if measured carefully and objectively, be small. In making decisions regarding the introduction of new teaching techniques, the investment of faculty time required for such innovations might be weighed in relation to the potential gains in student performance.

A review of the literature on teaching criminology found that the influence of ECPS on student learning has been a neglected area in research on learning. Work in psychology and education has also been limited in scope and inconclusive in terms of any possible impact of ECPS on overall learning (e.g., Kerkman et al. 1994; Thorne 2000). Future work is needed to determine whether the results of the present study will replicate in other educational settings and institutions. These might include smaller classes and liberal arts colleges. However, some research is available on the influence of extra credit options on students in other disciplines. For example, Gaddis and Elliott (1997) determined that 10 accounting students completing an extra credit session improved their scores on the subsequent exam while the average scores for the 16 nonparticipants in ECPS did not change. Students volunteering for ECPS where they would receive one percentage point for being the subject in a psychological research experiment were found to be disproportionately top students whose grades remained unaffected by such participation (Bender 1986). Hence, like the present study, published and unpublished papers on extra credit impacts have mixed findings; additional work is needed to specify what conditions will optimize the impacts of ECPS on student learning (Bender 1986; Gaddis and Elliott 1997; Kerkman et al. 1994; Thorne 2000).

Research on a related pedagogical technique—supplemental instruction (SI)—may help to bolster the present study's results. While not extra credit, like ECPS SI does involve extra work in a course. Generally, SI involves a high degree of student interaction in SI sessions. These sessions and study groups are peer taught and peer led (Hodges and White 2001). The peer leader is often a student who received a high grade in the same course earlier in his/her academic career. The research on SI has documented a positive impact on GPA. The positive impact has been found in research based on a variety of fields including mathematics (Allen et al. 1992), criminal justice (Bushway and

Flower 2002), history (Hodges, Dochen, and Joy 1999), and general education (Hodges and White 2001; see University of Missouri-Kansas City 1999 for a review). For example, in a study of a required general education freshman seminar, students taking SI earned a mean semester grade of 2.35 compared to a mean grade of 1.95 for students not taking SI (Hodges and White 2001). Students who do extra work for a course, whether it is ECPS or attendance in SI sessions, may exhibit enhanced performance on general or specific learning objectives.

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Appendix

Table A1 Correlation matrix, means, and standard deviations of variables in the analysis

	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8
Final exam (X1)	—	.277*	.614*	.020	.039	.069	−.117	.024
Paper grade (X2)		—	.246	.116*	−.132*	.051	−.136*	−.107
GPA exams (X3)			—	.037	−.013	.043	.043	−.044
Extra credit (X4)				—	−.227*	.040	.077	.210*
GTA 1 (X5)					—	−.246*	−.236*	−.230*
GTA 2 (X6)						—	−.272*	−.275*
GTA 3 (X7)							—	−.254*
GTA 4 (X8)								—
Mean	81.47	90.67	83.62	1.007	.176	.221	.207	.198
SD	12.07	10.80	7.12	1.716	.381	.415	.406	.400

$*p < .05.$

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