Six-Word Memoirs: A Content Analysis of First-Year Course Learning Outcomes

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First-year courses prepare students for the transition to, and success in, college. Institutions are interested in assessing student learning outcomes to achieve institutional goals and maintain accreditation. Though it may be difficult to measure student learning and success, colleges aim to assess student learning in the classroom by setting learning outcomes and objectives. The purpose of this study was to explore students' achievement of learning outcomes in a required first-year course through their submission of six-word memoirs about what they learned. This study's framework was Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory through the process of legitimate peripheral participation.

First-year courses are being implemented at colleges around the United States to prepare students for the transition to college and success during and after their studies. Colleges and universities are also interested in assessing student learning outcomes to achieve institutional goals and maintain accreditation. Beno (2004) defined accreditation as "the primary means of quality assessment and assurance used by higher education in the United States" (p. 66). Though it may be difficult to measure student learning and success, colleges aim to assess student learning in the classroom by setting learning outcomes and objectives. According to Ewell (2001), "Student learning outcomes are rapidly taking center stage as the principal gauge of higher education's effectiveness" (p. 1). Institutions and faculty need to know what exactly a student learning outcome is before measuring it.

Student learning outcomes "are defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences" (Ewell, 2001, p. 13). Ewell (2001) explained that there are knowledge, skill, and affective outcomes as well as abilities learned by students. Knowledge outcomes encompass content in an academic discipline, skill outcomes involve doing something (e.g., "think critically, communicate effectively, productively collaborate"), affective outcomes relate to changes in beliefs or value development (e.g., "empathy, ethical behavior, self-respect, or respect for others"), and abilities represent the "integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in complex ways that require multiple elements of learning" (Ewell, 2001, p. 13). These outcomes can be assessed at the end of courses or an academic program.

The assessment of student learning is an important process at all institutions. Accrediting bodies (e.g., Middle States Commission on Higher Education, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges) have brought student learning outcomes into the standards for accreditation in the assessment of teaching and learning. Ewell (2001) defined the assessment of student learning outcomes as "the processes that an institution or program uses to gather direct evidence about the attainment of student learning outcomes, engaged in for purposes of judging (and improving) overall instructional performance" (p. 14). Institutional learning outcomes are often tied to the general education curriculum (Ewell, 2011). First-year experience courses are often required as part of general education requirements (Hyers & Joslin, 1998; Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Friedman and Marsh (2009) observed, "First-year seminars have increasingly become a common vehicle for helping student adjust to the intellectual and social demands of higher education with hopes of improved student learning" (p. 29). The purpose of this study is to explore students' achievement of learning outcomes in a required first-year course.

Review of the Literature

Keup and Barefoot (2005) utilized longitudinal, multi-institutional data to determine first-year seminars' impact on student learning, transition, and experience. Anaylzing data from 3,680 students at 50 institutions, they found that first-year seminars increased students' "feelings of personal success at establishing meaningful connections with faculty" and comfort with participating in class discussions (Keup & Barefoot, 2005, p. 25). Students' participation in first-year seminars connects with "positive and academic social experiences in college" (Keup & Barefoot, 2005, p. 36). Also, students are more "integrated into the campus community and more successful at various aspects of campus life" (Keup & Barefoot, 2005, p. 36). The faculty that facilitate the learning in first-year seminars enhance the possibility of students' achieving learning outcomes through student engagement. As the research indicated, students who are more active and

comfortable interacting with faculty in the first-year seminar classroom are more likely to be successful on campus in other areas and as they persist through their academic programs.

Smith, Goldfine, and Windham (2009) sought to compare students' meeting learning outcomes between independent first-year seminars and those embedded in learning communities. Drawing from 1,116 first-year students at a large, public institution, Smith and colleagues (2009) administered an instrument while hypothesizing students in the learning communities' seminars would meet course learning outcomes at a higher rate than students in the independent first-year seminars. The results did not support the hypothesis. However, Smith and colleagues (2009) noted some important implications from their study, noting "the learning outcomes of a course or program must always be at the forefront of teaching" (p. 59). This includes placing learning outcomes on the syllabus, connecting each assignment to learning outcomes, and discussing relevant learning outcomes to each classroom topic (Smith et al., 2009). These activities are intentional, which "is the key to helping students understand the connection between what they are doing and what they are learning" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 60). Of course, institutions will need to measure the achievement of learning outcomes through assessment.

Engberg and Mayhew (2007) sought to examine the impact of first-year seminars at a large, public institution in the southwest on student learning and democratic outcomes. They utilized the Student Thinking and Interacting Survey to study students enrolled in first-year seminars, including introductory courses in Engineering and Communication as pedagogical controls. Based on the results, Engberg and Mayhew (2007) found that the first-year seminar "employed a range of active learning strategies" (p. 253). These strategies led to an exposure of diverse perspectives, commitment to social justice, and development of critical thinking skills (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007). Their study demonstrated an effective assessment of particular learning objectives within the first-year seminars at one institution.

Utilizing a different perspective, Walker (2008) researched students' perceptions of learning outcomes and what they think they should learn in college. He commented, "We don't often consider the student perspectives on learning outcomes" to determine curriculum and course objectives (Walker, 2008, p. 47). Noting the complexities of assessment, Walker (2008) continued, "Identifying what is actually taught and actually learned at college are much more complicated" (p. 48). He sent a survey to two sections of a technical writing course at a mid-sized state university, garnering 41 respondents. The students who responded represented a variety of majors from the campus and were not limited to first-year students. Based of the responses, three categories of student learning emerged: course content, career and academic skills, and life skills. Walker (2008) also had students assess their faculty's effectiveness in helping their learning. Though the students responded positively about faculty helping them learn, Walker (2008) noted that "students took more credit for their learning than they gave to faculty" (p. 54). He cautioned that "by limiting assessment to administratively determined learning outcomes, we may shortchange valid perspectives for learning about *learning*" (Walker, 2008, p. 57). Walker (2008) recommended that students participate in the development of learning outcomes throughout their college experience, especially to eliminate marginalizing students with different learning strategies. Pintrich (1988) noted, "While instructors can design tasks to facilitate student learning, students are ultimately responsible for their own learning" (as cited in Walker, 2008, p. 48). The student voice is vital in the development and assessment of learning outcomes.

The *2006 National Survey of First-Year Seminars* collected data from 968 institutions, including representation of two-year and four-year and public and private institutions. From these respondents, 821 offered first-year seminars on their campuses and were considered in the research. In their study of the course objectives and assessment piece of the national survey, Griffin and Tobolowsky (2008) found that only 60.2% of the institutions conducted formal assessment of their first-year seminars since 2003. Griffin and Tobolowsky (2008) determined, "Student course evaluations were the most common form of assessment" but insitutions also utilized external instruments and national surveys (p. 87). Other modes of assessment included instructor and student focus groups, interviews with instructors and students, and institutional data (Griffin & Tobolowsky, 2008). Institutions that participated had a variety of different learning outcomes to assess, all of which are very "campus-specific" and are "tied to the institutional mission" (Griffin & Tobolowsky, 2008, p. 96). Griffin and Tobolowsky (2008) emphasized, "It is essential that campuses invest the time to identify learning objectives and measure them" (p. 96). As accrediting bodies have moved to incorporate student learning outcomes assessment into standards, institutions have engaged faculty, staff, and students in developing learning objectives.

Beno (2004) considered the role of student learning outcomes in accreditation quality review. She commented, "Many faculty…perceive work on student learning as a rewarding means of exploring student learning needs and new pedagogical strategies" (Beno, 2004, p. 65). Beno (2004) emphasized that accreditation evalutes institutional quality, which "is determined by how well an institution fulfills its purposes" and "producing learning is one of the core

purposes of an institution of higher education" (p. 66). The assessment of quality and learning is "in the context of the institution's own mission" (Beno, 2004, p. 66). The questions accreditors have include, "How well are students learning?," and, "How can learning be improved to in turn improve students' lives?" Beno (2004) discussed the shift in evaluating quality from measures of graduation rates and job placement to student learning and success. She explained that student learning outcomes must be appropriate for each course and align with institutional standards. The learning outcomes should be visible on course syllabi and have some way for the institution to measure them. Like Smith and colleagues (2009), Beno (2004) also recommended that learning outcomes be explicit to students via syllabi, course assignments, and classroom topics. Another consideration is for instructors to provide students feedback on their mastery of learning outcomes within the course. All of these suggestions could help improve student learning assessment, learning quality, and preparation for accreditation.

Considering that student learning is a core purpose of higher education, The Higher Learning Commission (2007) offered the following:

> A focus on achieved student learning is critical not only to a higher education organization's ability to promote and improve curricular and co-curricular learning experiences and to provide evidence of the quality of educational experiences and programs, but also to fulfill the most basic public expectations and needs of higher education (p. 1).

The Commission focuses on student learning and assessment as a major component to its accreditation process for colleges and universities. The Commission (2007) "makes clear the centrality of learning to effective higher education organizations and extends and deepens its commitment to and expectations for assessment" (p. 1). To provide guidance for its institutions, The Commission (2007) created six fundamental questions about student learning:

1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?
2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?
3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?
4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning and for assessment of student learning?
5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?

6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what students are learning—and how well? (p. 1)

Clearly, accrediting bodies have spotlighted the importance of student learning outcomes and their assessment on campuses in the United States. Though there are different means of assessment (as shown by Griffin & Tobolowsky, 2008), various modes of assessment are necessary to determine if institutional goals are met.

Theoretical Framework

The intent of many first-year seminars is to create a learning community. Indeed, the small first-year seminar is a very interactive environment. Through participation in class, the students and instructor create their own community learning environment. How does learning in community happen? Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning through the process of legitimate peripheral participation offers valuable insight into learning practices and outcomes. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners" and "the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (p. 29). Legitimate peripheral participation is described as a social process that involves "the learning of knowledgeable skills" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). The authors emphasized, "It is an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 40). This experience occurs "no matter which educational form provides a context for learning, or whether there is any intentional education form at all" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 40). The experience of students in the first-year experience classroom may enhance learning through participation in the social community developed by the seminar environment.

The seminar environment is designed to create intentional participation. While social learning happens with or without formally organized communities, the specific of the first-year seminar's design could be called a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) defined a community of practice as "a set of relations among persons activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). These sets of relations and overlapping experiences occur over the course of the semester in class. For example, in the classroom, if students form ad hoc groups based on results of a learning test to work on a class activity, they participate in a learning process. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not

exist in isolation; they are part of a broader system of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are produced and developed within social commnities" (p. 53).

This social process takes place through neogtiation of meaning, and "communities of practice are the prime context in which we can work out common sense through mutual engagement" (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). When diverse students come together in a seminar environment to learn, learning as a social process takes place. In this first-year experience course, the instructor facilitated engagement through involving students in each class session to discuss readings and topics. When discussing certain topics, students with experience in activities such as budgeting and interviewing were asked to share with the class advice and stories. Wenger (1998) explained, "We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate, and share them" (p. 48). As students increased their participation and involvement in the seminar, they had the ability to enhance the social process for all participants. Besides shaping one's own experience, a participant's ability "to shape the practice of our communities is an important aspect of our experience of participant" (Wenger, 1998, p. 57). However, Wenger (1998) noted that "it is not necessary that all participants interact intensely with everyone else or know each other very well" (p. 126). That means that even if the class only meets once a week, students can have an impact on each other's learning through the community of practice that forms within the seminar.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), there is a difference between a teaching curriculum (intended practices and outcomes designed by instructor) and a learning curriculum (actual practices and outcomes that emerge through participation). The structure of a teaching curriculum limits learning, and meaning-making is influenced by the instructor. In contrast, a learning curriculum incorporates the perspectives of the learners into the learning process as situated in the community of learners. Under the assumption that learners in the community "have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints," participants engage in learning activities at different levels, thus involving all students in the legitimate peripheral participation of the social environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). The learning curriculum "consists of situated opportunities" that include what Lave and Wenger (1991) call "exemplars" or goals, essentially learning outcomes. Students' memoirs surface this learning, and can reveal how the social practices of the community support intended and/or unintended outcomes.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore students' achievement of learning outcomes in a required first-year course. The research question is, "Do students' six-word memoirs reflect the syllabus course and institutional learning outcomes?" Essentially, the study aimed to determine if students share via six-word memoirs that what they learned is reflective of stated course and institutional learning outcomes and objectives on the course syllabus.

Method

Participants in the study were students enrolled in a first-year experience course at a small, public baccalaureate institution in the southwestern United States. On the first class day of the course, students reviewed the syllabus with the instructor, which had both course and institutional learning outcomes on it. The outcomes were tied to specific assignments or quizzes. The course was a hybrid course, and its online component also linked the course learning outcomes to sepcific assignments. The following list includes all course learning outcomes:

- Identify learning styles and how to use them to be successful in different types of college course settings
- Develop study and time management skills
- Understand how to manage personal finances
- Develop a matriculation plan for your college career
- Create and update a professional resume and cover letter, and know how to use these documents in the job search process
- Develop and articulate educational and career goals
- Develop the skills to network, search for jobs, and interview
- Learn the value of diversity in the campus community and workplace

In tandem with these course learning outcomes, the institutional outcomes on the syllabus included: (1) Develop communication abilities; (2) Develop critical thinking abilities; and (3) Develop effective citizenship. Each institutional objective had specific skills and knowledge expected, course learning outcomes associated with it, and specific assignments and exams related to it. A total of 551 data points were collected from nine sections of the course from 2011-2013. The class size was approximately 30 students per section. The instructor, who is also the author of this article, collected voluntary submissions of six-word memoirs

about what they learned in the course from students on the last night of the first-year seminar.

Six-Word Memoirs

Six-word memoirs were not a method used in prior research of assessing student learning outcomes. They have been employed in assessing students' learning of library knowledge in a college library skills course (Miller, 2011). Six-word memoirs and their usage were first developed and implemented by *SMITH Magazine*. Fershleiser and Smith (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) edited four collections of six-word memoirs after featuring calls for them from readers in the digital magazine. They introduced the following:

> Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in six words. Papa came back swinging with, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Some say he called it his best work. Others dismiss the anecdote as a literary folktale. Either way, the six-word story was born, and it's been popping around the writing world for years. (Fershleiser & Smith, 2008, p. v)

As the magazine took off in 2006, the six-word memoirs did too, and before the first edited book was published in 2008, Fershleiser and Smith (2008, 2010) discovered that teachers assigned six-word memoirs to their students, from kindergarten through graduate school. Considering the successful use of six-word memoirs to assess students' learning in the library course, the researcher decided to employ six-word memoirs as the tool to evaluate student learning in the first-year experience course (Miller, 2011).

Data Collection

On the last night of the first-year experience course, the instructor offered the six-word memoir submission as a voluntary extra credit assignment. Students were given examples from the library course research. The instructor also explained the purpose of the research project and handed out an informed consent form addressing the purpose of the research. Students who agreed to submit research did so voluntarily. Some students did submit the extra credit but elected not to participate in the research. The instructor then typed the submissions that were tied to agreeing to participate on the informed consent form, removed identifiers to the course, and never included students' identifying information. The submissions from the nine classes were put on one protected spreadsheet of data without any course identifiers whatsoever and amounted to 551 unique six-word memoirs.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized content analysis to explore the content of the six-word memoirs without referring back to the learning outcomes to avoid bias and being influenced by them. The researcher utilized NVivo software and employed emergent (or inductive) coding, where "categories are established following some preliminary examination of the data" (Stemler, 2001, para. 12). Emergent coding allowed the researcher to create codes (also called nodes) based on the data rather than based on the established learning outcomes, called a priori coding (Stemler, 2001). According to Bryant and Charmaz (2007), this process is part of substantive coding, where "the researcher works with the data directly, fracturing and analyzing it…through open coding for the emergence of a core category and related concepts" (p. 265). This type of coding is also called focused coding, in which the researcher "searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop categories" most prevalent from the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 213). The 551 six-word memoirs were coded, resulting in the creation of nine nodes, which are "'containers' for coding in NVivo software that reference the data in that category" (Bazeley & Richards, 2000, p. 24) from 627 words, phrases, or entire six-word memoirs. These nodes encompass the responses of students to what they learned in the first-year seminar course through six-word memoirs. A word frequency of the six-word memoirs was conducted for triangulation, which Denzin explained as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (as cited in Jick, 1979, p. 602) to see if any patterns of words emerged from the data. The most common word stem in the data was "learning," followed by "class," "resume," and "interview." "Learning" and "class" had significantly more mentions in the students' six-word memoirs than any other root word. The students were asked to write about anything they learned in the course, so these words could be influenced by the assignment.

Results and Discussion

The research question asked, "Do students' six-word memoirs reflect the syllabus course and institutional learning outcomes?" Considering the course and institutional learning outcomes from the syllabus, the researcher analyzed the data and compared the results to these outcomes. From the content analysis, nine rich emergent codes included: campus resources, career documents, financial aid/money management, learn from each other, perception of course or instructor, prepare for future, self-discovery, skills, and success. No six-word memoirs or nodes directly addressed the diversity learning outcome in the

syllabus. Each node will be described with a sample of submitted six-word memoirs.

Campus Resources

The campus resources node encompassed what students learned about resources to help them. Examples of six-word memoirs in this node are "Found useful library resources and help," "Guest speakers are really informative tools," and "Utilize academic advisors to graduate quickly." Campus resources enable students to develop these skills with appropriate tools and assistance. This node included six-word memoirs like "Found useful library resources and help" and, "Utilize academic advisors to graduate quickly." Once students become aware of resources and people on campus that impact other learning outcomes, then they may achieve progress towards graduation (prepare for future node, develop a matriculation plan learning outcome) or other learning outcomes.

Career Documents

All memoirs in the career documents node referred to resumes, cover letters, or follow-up letters, such as, "Learned to write my resume properly," and, "Thank you letter goes long way." Other examples include, "My resume sucked until this course," and, "Cover letters can set you apart." This node directly relates to the course learning outcome to create a professional resume and cover letter and learn how to use the documents in the job search process.

Financial Aid/Money Management

For the node of financial aid/money management, examples of six-word memoirs are "Never own too many credit cards," "Teaches how to save money now," and "Learning about school debt is eye-opening!" All of these memoirs are creative yet concise ways to express knowledge in the classroom. The financial aid/money management node included content from 30 six-word memoirs. "Learned how to manage money functionally," and, "Taught me how to budget finances," are examples of six-word memoirs in this category that directly relate to the syllabus learning outcome of understanding how to manage personal finances.

Learn from Each Other

In the learn from each other node, students shared six-word memoirs like "Loved to hear other people's stories," "Class is engaging, just like family," and, "Enjoyed hearing every student's own experience." This six-word memoir provides the direct connection between the learners and the social environment of the seminar.

Students listening to each other's experiences and interpretations of course content experienced legitimate peripheral participation. A number of students shared the experience and enjoyment of learning from each other or of the course being like a family. The seminar environment did allow for participation from all students, including a lot of interaction and discussion during classroom activities. Through the lens of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation, this node demonstrates that students in this first-year experience course learned from classmates and were influenced by what they shared during classroom learning. This occurred through the community of practice and the negotiation of meaning through the information and ideas shared by classmates.

Perception of Course or Instructor

One of the three largest nodes is perception of course or instructor. Examples of this node include "Got great feedback from the teacher," "My teacher is knowledgeable and professional," "Great class to begin college career," "Impressed how fun this class was," "Gave me faith in school again," "Pleasantly surprised with the knowledge learned," and, "This class prepared me for college!" The six-word memoirs did provide great feedback about the course and instructor experience in addition to teaching evaluations. The majority of the six-word memoirs within this node reflected positive or constructive comments about the first-year seminar itself, including content, timing, design, and assignments. An example was "Fun informative class about life skills." Other six-word memoirs in this node provided feedback about the instructor (e.g., "Loved your passion for this class"). The students were asked to write about anything they learned in the course, so it is interesting that students learned about the course structure and instructor's influence, part of the situated learning experience explored by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Students also provided a critical view of the course and instructor through the six-word memoirs. Examples include, "Class was fun, but more interaction," "Class needs to be more interesting," and, "My head hurts after this class." Sometimes, students had negative perceptions after learning the course topics. Examples of these include, "Class made me scared to graduate," "I am not getting this class," and, "I am dreading ever being interviewed." Each student experiences learning from course materials and instructors differently, so it is important for instructors to understand if students are struggling or if teaching styles are not successful. In this course, the instructor designed the class to reach students based on learning styles and multiple intelligences quizzes taken on the first day of class, but that does not result in every

student having a successful learning experience or enjoying the class or instructor.

Prepare for Future

In the prepare for future node, students wrote six-word memoirs like, "Made me eager to career search," "Goals are very important in life," "Learned the classes left to graduate," "This class gave me more ambition," "My future is more clear today," and, "My unknown journey has a direction." Besides feeling more prepared for college, many students learned a lot about themselves throughout their experience in the first-year seminar. The prepare for future node relates directly to the development of a matriculation plan. The learning outcome of developing career and educational goals is related to both preparing for the future and self-discovery. An example of a six-word memoirs in the prepare for future node was "Matriculation project was a look forward." Developing educational and career goals certainly is related to preparing for the future, yet a lot of students in first-year seminars are discovering not only their educational and career direction, but often their identity also.

Self-Discovery

The self-discovery node showcased different experiences of students' personal development or understanding of self, learned through the course. These six-word memoirs include, "Identified my top values and priorities," "Take credit for your great work," "Felt more confidence with each assignment," "Life needs balance for full potential," "I was a very quiet student," "I never knew that before today," "I learned what my weaknesses are," and, "Have never valued education so much." Other rich examples of self-discovery include, "I learned about my personal values," "The importance of having an education," "Learned that my knowledge has value," "I got to know myself better," and "I feel I finally found myself." There are many more instances of different self-discovery experiences shared through the students' six-word memoirs. Many of these do relate to the development of career and educational goals, but other self-discovery content connected with the institutional learning outcome, Develop effective citizenship, listed above.

Skills

The largest node, skills, encompasses many of the skills-related syllabus learning outcomes: learning styles, time management, study techniques, and career skills like job searching and interviewing. Some examples are, "Gave me tools to assist me," "Had fun discovering different career options," "Found out how to conduct research," "Make sure to use action verbs,"

and, "Happiness is keeping a detailed schedule." Students demonstrated knowledge of career development, time management, library usage, and many other skills relevant to academic and life success. Additional six-word memoirs coded in the skills nodes were "My learning style is auditory learner," "I learned about time management here," "Learned more strategies for my studying," "I learned interview do's and don'ts," and "Networking helps find future job possibilities." The institutional learning outcomes of develop communication abilities and critical thinking abilities also fall under the skills node. Six-word memoirs in the skills category related to these outcomes include, "Communication is the key to success," "This class helped me with shyness," and, "This class made me think more!"

Success

Success is the last node emergent from the data. Some six-word memoirs in this node are "Education is the foundation of success," "My success is measured by me," and "Finally feel on track, let's roll!" The success node and its content do not directly tie to any of the course or institutional learning outcomes on the syllabus. Though many of the six-word memoirs of this node may overlap with some of the other nodes or learning outcomes, the content may be more general to students' feelings at the end of the course. An example of a six-word memoir in the success module was, "College success = living the good life." Readers may assume this relates to a matriculation plan or a benefit that will lead to a career, but this also could be related to developing good citizens for society. However, no direct connection can be made between the success node and its memoirs within it.

Limitations

This study had a few limitations. The researcher was the sole coder of the data, thus there is no measure of interrater or intracoder reliability. However, the exercise enabled the instructor of these courses to determine what was learned by students, which was a helpful reflective exercise for teaching and learning. Though the researcher did not refer to the learning outcomes before coding the data, she did place them on the syllabus and incorporate them in the classroom, so it is possible that the outcomes influenced her. However, the data were collected from 2011-2013, the researcher last taught the course in the Spring of 2014, and the data was not coded until the Fall of 2014, so there was a considerable time gap from the influence of the syllabus learning outcomes on the coding process.

Conclusion

Much can be learned from students' six-word memoirs about their learning experiences in the first-year seminar. This provided a creative outlet for students to express what they learned in the course. This prompt, given to students as the last activity in the course in each section, allowed for students to share any area of learning impact throughout the first-year experience course. Nine rich categories emerged from the content analysis of the six-word memoirs data set. Six of these nine categories directly connected to the course and institutional learning outcomes stated on the syllabus provided to students at the beginning of the first-year seminar: career documents, financial aid/money management, learning from each other, preparation for future, self-discovery, and skills. The other nodes, perception of course or instructor, campus resources and success, are relevant in terms of overlap and influence on student learning, though they do not directly correspond to a particular learning outcomes on the syllabus. The perception of course or instructor also indicates that this is an alternative way for students to evaluate the course and instructor in addition to assessing learning outcomes.

Based on the results of this study, there is a significant connection between the student learning outcomes on the syllabus and what students learned in the classroom. Smith and colleagues (2009) had emphasized the importance of a connection between what students are doing and learning. Through the six-word memoirs, students in these first-year seminars expressed learning a variety of concepts in the course related to stated learning outcomes for the course and the institution. Lave and Wenger (1991) explained in situated learning theory that students have different perspectives in the learning environment and that learning is an improvised practice. Though students contribute to class and learn differently from each other, students in this first-year experience course over time connected to a variety of stated learning outcomes. This could be attributed to starting the course with stated exemplars and the process of legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice. This was one way to measure if the student learning outcomes were aligned with activities in the classroom and institutional standards for accreditation (Beno, 2004). Lave and Wenger (1991) noted that the learning curriculum is developed through the learners' experiences in the situated learning opportunities in the classroom environment, whereas a teaching curriculum is heavily influenced by structure and the instructor. The first-year seminar provides an environment ripe for students to experience legitimate peripheral participation through situated learning utilizing the exemplars (expressed learning outcomes) for the course

(Lave & Wenger, 1991). Setting clear learning outcomes in the syllabus and sharing them with the class at the beginning may benefit student learning throughout the first-year course. This provides institutions strong opportunities to assess student learning outcomes achievement using a variety of techniques with suggested guidelines by The Higher Learning Commission (2007) and other accrediting agencies.

Implications

The first-year seminar provides an environment that fosters situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation by the students in the classroom. Though the instructor and institution set learning outcomes that were written in the syllabus, the outcomes did not necessarily create a structure that controlled classroom learning. Rather, through the seminar environment and student involvement, learning outcomes were achieved through the learning curriculum that the students experienced. This result is significant as the accreditation community aims to incorporate and emphasize student learning outcomes as a measure of quality. Because the first-year seminar serves a specific purpose in a general education curriculum whether required or not, its classroom environment should engage students through discussion and learning from each other. In a way, the instructor becomes a facilitator who allows students to learn from each other or challenge each other to participate more in classroom activities.

Six-word memoirs were a creative tool to explore miniature anecdotes of what students learned in the first-year experience course, but there are many ways to assess student learning. In this study, six-word memoirs provided a new way to assess student learning and relate it to learning outcomes stated in the syllabus. Carefully designing learning outcomes (both for courses and institution-wide) is important to prepare for accreditation and the standards of teaching and learning. Once learning outcomes are established, assessing student learning can be explored both through emergent and a priori means, or via quantitative measures, which are ideas for future research. Also, employing multiple coders for the data, especially those who did not instruct the courses, could determine different angles in exploring the data. In this study, the first-year seminar provided an arena that allowed for students to engage in legitimate peripheral participation, therefore directly achieving learning outcomes and learning about other areas important to the college experience: campus resources and success. The pinnacle of this research is the convergence of exploring educational quality (via accreditation), assessing student learning (outcomes), and the importance of the first-year seminar. All of these

concepts coupled with students' experience in the first-year course may also allow for instructor evaluation through a different perspective. In this particular course, students' learning closely aligned with learning outcomes and the essence of the first-year seminar. One student shared, "Wish this class were a pocketbook."

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