

THEME-BASED COURSES FOSTER STUDENT LEARNING AND PROVIDE COMFORT WITH NEW MATERIAL

Topic's Significance

This article investigates 3 separate classes utilizing theme-based approaches to either arts or biology college-level education, using a pre-post questionnaire design to assess students' perceived competency in achieving class learning objectives and comfort level with new academic material otherwise of little interest. The article does an excellent job of reviewing the relevant literature and identifying gaps that need to be addressed. Specifically, the authors cite the lack of empirical research as well as a dearth of in-depth interventions as shortcomings to be remedied. I find the article to be significant because it provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the benefits of theme instruction, particularly in increasing comfort with the academic material presented and even, in one case (nursing students) deepening appreciation for one's chosen field of study. In terms of integration of arts into education, the point made here is that students can be persuaded of the relevance of art to their lives and study if theme teaching is used.

Theoretical Framework

The review of literature is thorough, and looks at different bodies of knowledge implicated in the study. In this way, the review provides a clear rationale for every aspect of the project, including existing evidence about theme instruction (and the limits of this approach); reports of how the arts have been integrated into health professions education; how food has been used to teach about art; and how themes have been used in science education. I am not familiar with three of these academic areas, but in terms of the arts and healthcare I found that the literature cited was relevant and up-to-date.

Research Design and Methods

The research design benefits from its simplicity – a straightforward pre-post questionnaire with both quantifiable and narrative elements. This mixed-methods approach is commendable and very well-suited toward providing hard data as well as subjective information that deepens the quantitative findings.

The biggest limitation of the design is that it is not a comparative one. While students clearly seemed to benefit from their participation in these theme-based courses, we do not know whether their mastery of course objectives, for example, exceeded what would have occurred using a standard teaching approach. In this regard, I feel the Discussion overstates the unique benefits of this approach, because it is possible that students' perception of knowledge gained and/or positive feelings about the subject matter being taught would improve at the end of exposure regardless of whether that exposure was linked to a theme.

The courses chosen for inclusion in the study are well-described with sufficient detail to understand how themes were integrated into the coursework and used to teach either art or science. The themes themselves were well-chosen in terms of their interest and relevance to learners. The authors provided a nuanced explanation of how themes were either strongly integrated (2 of the classes) or lightly integrated (the food and arts class) into the courses. More information needs to be provided about the subjects if possible (sex, ages, race/ethnicity if

available, lower/upper division). Also, the total number of students in the 3 classes and the number of actual respondents both need to be clearly stated (it is possible to calculate based on the information provided, but it would be easier to simply have the total number) so that readers can determine the response rate.

The questionnaire was very well tailored to investigate the research questions stated at the start of the article. I appreciated seeing the actual items, although I think this material could be placed in an appendix at the end of the article. IRB approval was obtained, and it appeared that students were informed appropriately of the option not to participate in the study.

Interpretation/Analysis/Description

The statistical methods used to analyze the quantitative portion of the study are appropriate. In the Discussion, note should be made that the number of post-tests returned for the arts and health class was only a little over 62% of the number of pre-tests, and how this might have affected the results. The table of results is quite thorough, perhaps excessively so. It is very long, and takes some wading through. Especially since the objectives are not explicitly stated, this section becomes just a jumble of numbers, albeit statistically significant numbers.

The qualitative aspect is analyzed using grounded theory, an appropriate methodology for understanding and interpreting this material. The qualitative data presented were rich and detailed, and consistently supported the points made in the article narrative.

The unique aspects of the theme approach were well-stated. On the other hand, a finding such as students increased interest in using arts in their chosen profession could not have occurred in a standard course so it is a little inaccurate to imply a superiority of the theme approach in this regard; and this result might be achieved in other ways than use of themes (for example, using art to deepen understanding of aspects of healthcare in a medical school class).

One of the most intriguing findings emerged from the qualitative data, which documented a shift in the richness, complexity, and depth of understanding of the content material (art, science) that occurred comparing the beginning to the end of the classes. However, because of the noncomparative design, it is impossible to know whether a similar phenomenon might not also have occurred with regular instruction. Also unexpected was the high level of anxiety students reported in the arts and health class. The fact that this anxiety decreased during the theme-based teaching was reassuring; but again, simple familiarity with the subject matter might explain this finding.

Organization/Quality of Writing/Presentation

The article is quite well-written. It has a logical spine, is well-organized, and proceeds clearly and accessibly from one point to another.

Contributions to the Field/Appropriateness and Overall Interest for this Audience

The article makes a well-argued and well-supported case for the value of theme-based instruction that increases student ability to perceive arts (or science) content as meaningful and relevant, and reduces their anxiety about such subject matter (particularly in the arts). In addition, while often

the arts are used to make other educational material more accessible and meaningful (for example, teaching about the doctor-patient relationship using paintings), the present study turned this equation on its head by using themes of personal or professional interest to make arts (or science) content more palatable. The fact that three separate courses were sampled adds weight to the study's conclusions. I think this innovative methodology would be of considerable interest to the journal's readership.

Overall Recommendation:

Accept _____

Accept with Revisions X _____

Submit for Review _____

Submit Elsewhere _____

Decline _____

Revisions should include more information about students enrolled in the classes, including stating the overall number more clearly (18/section x 7=126?); and more information about students actually participating in the study (as well as whether there were any differences in terms of sex, age, race/ethnicity etc. between the two groups). Please revise Table 3 to shorten and consolidate. Under Limitations, authors should discuss that since this was not a comparative study (i.e., standard teaching vs. theme teaching) it was impossible to determine whether the latter method is superior to standard approaches. For instance, although for all classes, positive feelings about the subject matter improved, this might have happened in a class using standard teaching approaches as well. Similarly, perceived improvement in subject matter knowledge presumably would have occurred in a standard class.