

Cultivating citizenship skills through teaching and learning in the humanities

Michael Griffin, Assistant Professor, CNERS and Philosophy
Marlise Hofer, MA Candidate, Psychology

Introduction

“Citizenship skills” such as perspective-taking and empathy are often described as valuable outcomes of a university education, facilitating social and corporate leadership and civic responsibility; they are also valuable for a campus committed to equity and diversity. But they are rarely identified as course-level or program-level curricular outcomes. This project aims to identify methods of teaching and learning within the humanities that are correlated with a positive increase in citizenship skills, using validated psychological measures of perspective-taking, empathy, interpersonal and intercultural fluency.

Materials and Methods

Students complete two surveys. The first is a “pre-education” questionnaire administered during the first few weeks of classes; the second is a “post-education” questionnaire during the final weeks of the course. In the pilot phase, the experimental group is drawn from students in philosophy and classical studies courses. The control group is similarly aged students enrolled in a course that does not employ signature pedagogies from the humanities. Surveys include validated measures of empathy and perspective taking and an essay qualitatively coded for Integrative Complexity (Suedfeld, Tetlock & Streufert, 1992). Similar traits will be measured for a population of 5,000 students in the UES.

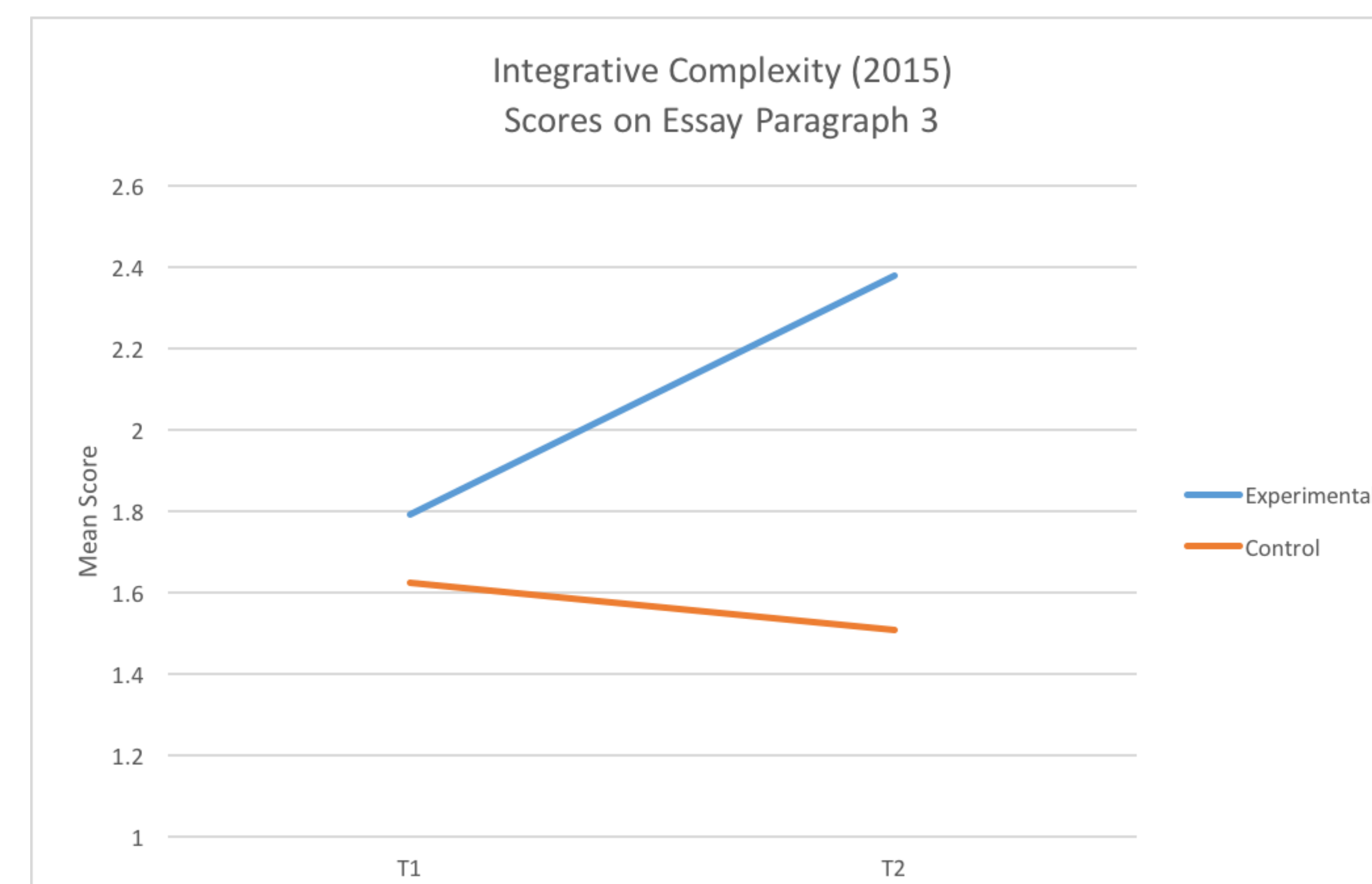
Preliminary Results

Results from surveyed courses and from the 2015-2016 Undergraduate Engagement Survey (N = 5,000) are expected in May 2016.

Integrative Complexity: Significant evidence for positive change in experimental group. Preliminary results from term 2 in 2015 (qualitative scoring on student essays) suggest a statistically significant increase ($p = .035$) in integrative complexity in an experimental group (N = 30) from the beginning to the end of a 13-week term, compared to a control group (N=54).

This preliminary result has been verified for reliability by two qualified IC scorers, but further analysis will be required to confirm this result.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index—Empathic Concern Scale: Limited evidence for significant difference between experimental and control groups. In preliminary results from term 1, the control group have a decrease in their average levels of empathic concern and the those in the experimental group have no change, and they are significantly different from one another.



Other scales, including Meaning in Life, Need for Cognition (a measure of curiosity), and the Empathy Quotient: No significant change. In preliminary results from term 1 and term 2, no significant difference was detected between control and experimental groups.

Next steps: Next steps include correlating preliminary results with student scores in some classes, correlating results with the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI) scores of instructors, and coding results from the UES, from which we anticipate 5,000 subjects.

Conclusions

Preliminary results have provided some tentative support for the hypothesis that Integrative Complexity – the ability to distinguish and integrate different perspectives on an issue – is trainable through “signature pedagogies” employed in the Humanities.

As we proceed with data analysis from year 1, our focus shifts in year 2 to a larger dataset (the UES results) and an identification of mechanisms, including postulating which signature pedagogies in the Humanities may be responsible for positive change in these traits.

Candidates include writing-intensive coursework and in-class oral discussion where the instructor models a tolerant but rigorous attitude toward varying views expressed in class. The Teaching Perspectives Inventory will be a useful tool for measuring instructor attitudes.

Together with a preliminary study suggesting that reading classical literature may contribute to training Theory of Mind (ToM) in healthy adults (Kidd and Castano, 2013), this study’s later results may contribute to a broader understanding of the social value of humanities education.

Literature Cited

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Further Information

Updates on the study’s results in year 2 will be posted on Michael Griffin’s website at www.michaeljamesgriffin.com.

