Drama 116, Perspectives in Theater, is a survey course that explores the intersection of acting, directing, designing and playwriting across major theatrical works. Since 2009, Kathy Hunter-Williams has taught two 300-student sections of the course each semester. The course has no recitation sections. Prior to the redesign, Hunter-Williams relied primarily on her lectures to convey course concepts. Students had few opportunities to interact with peers and were not as engaged with the course as she wanted. During the Fall 2012 semester she began implementing several course changes.

She broke up her lectures with in-class poll questions and small group assignments that helped prepare students for class discussions gave them a chance to learn from each other. Whereas previously she had administered pop quizzes to provide her with formative feedback on student understanding, she began discussing the results of the quizzes during class so that students could make use of the feedback themselves. She implemented a new group project in which team members assumed different theater production roles. She assigned the project early in the semester so that students would begin interacting earlier and she devoted some class time for student groups to meet. She gave students additional incentive to participate by assigning points for a participation grade. Finally, she invited struggling students to meet with her to discuss study strategies.

Table 1 provides an overview of differences between the formats for the traditional and redesigned versions of the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>DRAM 116 – Course structure</th>
<th>Outreach to at-risk students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary in-class method</td>
<td>In-class polls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redesigned</td>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>Lecture w/activities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Findings (all statistically significant)

- Students in the redesigned course were more likely to ask questions and contribute to class discussions than students in the traditional courses.
- Students in the redesigned course were more likely to come to class having completed assigned readings and other homework.
- Students in the redesigned course were more likely to help one another and to value interactions with their peers.
Methodology

Students taking the traditionally taught course sections during the Spring 2012 semester were asked to complete an online survey on their attitudes about the course. The same survey was administered to students taking the course during the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semesters. The Spring 2012 and Spring 2013 cohorts were used for comparison purposes to help control for differences between student cohorts across the fall and spring semesters. The results of a comparison between learning outcomes for students in the redesigned and traditional sections is pending.

Student Engagement

Several survey questions were taken from the National Survey of Student Engagement Survey, which measures student activities shown to be related to positive learning and developmental outcomes. The survey has been administered at UNC four times since 2005. In addition to statistically significantly higher scores on student participation and preparation, students in the redesigned course also reported working harder during the course to meet instructor expectations and assigned greater importance to attending lecture than students in the traditionally-taught courses. Another aspect of student learning that the survey explored is sense of community within the learning environment. Students’ willingness to work together, their sense of belonging to course-related peer groups, and comfort level participating in class have been shown to correlate to higher student learning outcomes. Students in the redesigned courses scored higher on all of the survey questions related to sense of community, with statistically significant differences on 75% of the questions.

Instructor Comments

“Complete and satisfying” are the words that Hunter-Williams uses to describe her thoughts about the course redesign. She feels much more engaged with her students, noting greater spontaneity in her interactions with them. Having successfully adopted new methods has also helped make her more risk-tolerant in the classroom. “I feel the freedom to try new things,” she says. “I am more open now to new ways of teaching.” She encourages peers to seek out feedback from their students as they explore new instructional methods. “Most of the students are willing to go along,” she says.

Next Steps

Hunter-Williams will continue to tweak her course and new techniques based on input from her students. She would like to continue integrating new technologies that facilitate discussion within small student groups and project teams. She is also interested in exploring the creation of a video course pack featuring graduate students performing select plays and scenes. This resource would complement the theater productions on campus that students taking the course are expected to see.

For more information about the project evaluation, please contact Andrea Reubens at the Center for Faculty Excellence (reubens@email.unc.edu).