

Investigating The Jack The Ripper Case: Engaging Students In A Criminal Investigations Class Through Active Learning

Daniel Gutierrez, Brown Mackie College, USA
Syed Kazmi, Brown Mackie College, USA

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the utilization of a class project involving the Jack the Ripper murders. Students enrolled in a criminal investigations class were required to investigate the five canonical murders associated with the infamous serial killer known as Jack the Ripper and the murders that occurred in London during 1888. This paper explains the project and how students perceived the project. A brief survey of student perceptions regarding the project indicate that overall students thought the project was an excellent active learning experience. The project has excellent potential for active learning applications in others courses as well such as criminology, a special topics course about violent offenders or perhaps a forensic psychology class.

Keywords: Active learning, criminal investigations, Jack the Ripper, criminology, forensic psychology

INTRODUCTION

Active learning has been lauded as being a viable education methodology that enables students to become more engaged in the learning process and has recently received considerable attention and attracted strong advocates among faculty, educational administrators and educational researchers (Prince, 2004). Defined as any educational method of instruction that engages students in the learning process by requiring them to engage in meaningful and curriculum related activities, active learning also makes student think about what they are learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Conversely, it has been contrasted to traditional learning as a better methodology of teaching and learning because students are no longer just passive receptors of information (Prince, 2004).

The present paper discusses and examines an active learning project that students were required to participate in while enrolled in a criminal investigations class. The project involved students actively involved in investigating the infamous Jack the Ripper murders that occurred in London during 1888.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Students enrolled in a criminal investigations class were required to investigate the five canonical murders believed to be the work of the infamous serial killer known as Jack the Ripper. Information for the project was collected by students who were directed to visit the “Casebook” website (<http://www.casebook.org/>). The website contains a plethora of information about the murders including information about the victims, thirty-one suspects, related case documents and evidence, newspaper articles, and additional reference materials about Jack the Ripper. The five canonical victims selected for the project included Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly. The instructor also selected five suspects that were considered very viable suspects that would present the students with challenges requiring them to apply critical thinking skills and create links between evidence, victims, and suspects. The five suspects included Joseph Barnett, George Chapman, R. D’Onston Stephenson, Francis Thompson, and Francis Tumblety (see Appendix A).

On the first day of class students were provided a handout that described the project and what was expected in terms of project requirements. One of the main goals of the project was to get the students to think critically, ferret through the information and evidence and then submit a typed paper identifying who they thought the best suspect was that could be Jack the Ripper. Within the contents of the paper, students were required to support their decision based on evidence and links they formed during the investigative process. They were also required to explain why their particular suspect was selected over the other suspects and why the other potential suspects were eliminated. Throughout the course it was emphasized that their goal was not to solve the case, but rather to select the best suspect based on the evidence they examined. Students were also given the option and encouraged to collaborate or work with one other student on the project and several did in fact select that option. At the end of each class period, ample time was dedicated to discussion of the five victims, suspects and evidence students had discovered through researching the case.

MOTIVATING STUDENTS

While most students seem naturally enthusiastic about learning, others may need or perhaps even expect faculty to inspire, challenge and stimulate their intellectual curiosity (Gross, 1999) and as Ericksen has noted, “effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher’s ability... to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place” (Ericksen, 1978, p.3). Regardless of the level of motivation student’s bring to your classroom, instructors have the opportunity to harness and transform that motivation by creating an environment that taps into student motivation. According to Davis (1993), students respond well to instructors who are enthusiastic and have a genuine interest in students and what they learn and as Sass (1989) notes, several characteristics are related to student motivation. These include the instructor’s enthusiasm, relevance of material, active student engagement, and the use of appropriate examples or material. Baker and Pomerantz (2001) have also noted that students prefer instructors who are excited about the subject they teach and also prefer teachers that are able to motivate them.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS/FINDINGS

After students completed their projects and submitted their papers, they were asked to complete a brief survey concerning the project. A total of fourteen students completed the survey which included nine items about the project and four items about the instructor. Because the class size was so small we decided not to exclude surveys where students did not rate an item. Students were asked to rate each survey item according to whether they strongly disagreed, moderately disagreed, somewhat disagreed, somewhat agreed, moderately agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. The items related to the project included the following: 1) was the project appropriate for the class, 2) did they find the project intellectually stimulating, 3) did it require the use of analytical skills, 4) did they find it academically challenging, 5) did they consider it a unique learning experience, 6) did the project keep their interest during the course of the term, 7) did they enjoy working on the project, 8) did they discuss the project outside of class, and 9) would they like to see more projects of this nature in their classes.

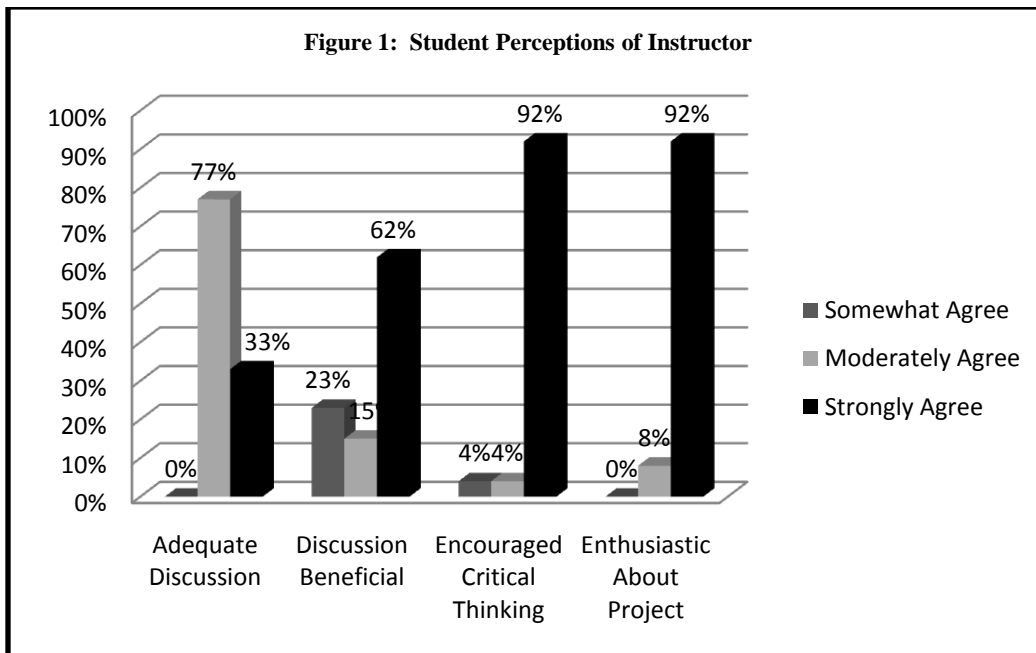
As indicated by Table 1, most students either moderately or strongly agreed, which indicates an overall favorable rating of the project. In four of the areas, which included course/project appropriateness, intellectually stimulating, required analytical skills, and project uniqueness, 93% of the students either moderately or strongly agreed. In two areas, whether the project kept their interest during the term and whether they discussed the project outside of class, 100% of the students either moderately or strongly indicated that the project kept their interest and that they engaged in discussion about outside of class. In terms of whether or not they enjoyed the project and would like to see more projects of this nature in their classes, 86% and 85%, respectively, indicated they either moderately or strongly enjoyed working on the project and would like to see more active learning projects in their classes. While only 78.5% moderately or strongly felt the project was academically challenging, no students indicated that the project was not at least somewhat challenging.

The items related to the instructor included the following: 1) did the instructor provide enough time in class for discussion of the project, 2) did they find the discussion beneficial, 3) were they encouraged to think critically, and 4) was the instructor enthusiastic about the project.

Table 1: Student Perceptions of Jack the Ripper Project

	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Project was appropriate for the course.	0%	7%	21.5%	71.5%
2. Project was intellectually stimulating.	7%	0%	36%	57%
3. Project required use of analytical skills.	0%	7%	36%	57%
4. Project was academically challenging.	0%	21.5%	28.5%	50%
5. Considered the project unique.	0%	7%	14%	79%
6. Project kept my interest during the term.	0%	0%	21.5%	78.5%
7. Enjoyed working on the project.	0%	14%	14%	72%
8. Discussed the project outside of class.	0%	0%	14%	86%
9. Would like to see more projects like this in class.	0%	15%	31%	54%

As indicated in Figure 1, none of the students indicated that they strongly, moderately or even somewhat agreed that discussion of the project was inadequate or not beneficial to them or that the instructor did not encourage them to think critically and was not enthusiastic about the project. The highest ratings were in the areas of encouraging students to think critically and demonstrating enthusiasm for the project. In both categories, 92% of the students indicated that they strongly agreed the instructor encouraged them to critically think about the project and that the instructor was enthusiastic about the project as well.



In addition to students favorably responding to the survey questions, several students included positive comments regarding their experience with the project. The comments indicate the levels of interest generated by the project, devotion or commitment to the project, how challenging they found the project and a sustained interest in the Jack the Ripper case.

- “This project was very interesting. I was discussing the project with others and letting them read what was going on with the suspects. I am planning to dig deeper into the case just for common knowledge.”
- “I loved this project. It was intriguing and challenging all of the same time. Thank you for the opportunity.”

- “I enjoyed this project so much I was almost obsessed with it and wanting to solve it.”
- “This project was very interesting... I found myself working on it a lot at home. It is by far the coolest and most interesting project I’ve done in college.”

These comments provided us with an additional window of opportunity to explore and gain additional insight into how students perceived the project. Clearly they demonstrate strong levels of commitment, motivation to learn, and how much they enjoyed the project.

DISCUSSION

Overall, students rated the project very favorably. The instructor also received high marks when it came to encouraging students to think critically about the evidence they explored and instructor enthusiasm for the project. Responses also indicate that students were highly engaged in the project outside of the classroom as the vast majority indicated that they found themselves discussing the project outside of class.

From an instructor’s perspective, the project was very engaging and involved the students through active learning. It required students to critically think about the evidence presented in the class and to create links between the evidence, victims, and suspects presented in the assignment. Students were certainly challenged by the project and enjoyed working on the case at the same time. Active learning projects such as this provide excellent venues for engaging students, and at the same time challenge their thinking. The project has excellent potential for other courses as well, such as a criminology class, a course on violent offenders and even perhaps a forensic psychology course.

While the project was well received and has excellent potential, the project may not be without limitations. One reason why students may have been so engaged in the project is the learning environment in which the class was offered. The course was offered as a compressed course that was completed in four weeks time. It may be possible that if the project were presented in a traditional setting over a fifteen week semester students may lose interest in the project. Because the institution only offers courses using this compressed model, we can only speculate that this may be the case. Until the project is offered in a learning environment other than a compressed model, we will be hard pressed to address this perceived limitation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to extend a special thank you to Stephen P. Ryder, editor of the casebook.org website, for granting special permission to use the photos of the victims and suspects as they appear on the website.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Daniel Gutierrez has been teaching criminal justice courses for twenty years and is currently teaching at Brown Mackie College, located in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has authored several papers about teaching and learning and is a strong advocate of active learning. He earned his Master of Arts degree in criminal justice from Saginaw Valley State University.

Syed Kazmi is currently teaching at Brown Mackie College in the Business and Technology Department and is chair of the department. He received his MBA from Indiana Tech University in management and human resources.

REFERENCES

1. Baker, S., & Pomerantz, N. (2001). Impact of learning communities on retention at a metropolitan university. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 2(2), 115-126.
2. Bonwell, C.C., & Eison, J.A. (1991). Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom. ASHEERIC Higher Education Report No. 1, George Washington University, Washington, DC.
3. Ryder, S. P. (Ed.). Casebook: Jack the Ripper. Accessed May 26, 2009, <http://www.casebook.org>.
4. Davis, B. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

5. Ericksen, S. C. (1978). The lecture: Memo to the faculty, No. 60. Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
6. Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-231.
7. Robinson, Matthew B. (2000). Using active learning in criminal justice: Twenty-five examples. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 11(1), 65-78.
8. Sass, E. J. (1989). Motivation in the college classroom: What students tell us. *Teaching of Psychology*, 16(2), 86-88.

APPENDIX A

The Victims & Suspects

VICTIMS



Mary Ann Nichols



Annie Chapman



Elizabeth Stride



Catherine Eddowes



Mary Jane Kelly

SUSPECTS



Joseph Barnett



George Chapman



R.D. Stephenson



Francis Thompson



Francis Tumblety