

A LOOK AT THE EFFECTS OF ORDERING OF ASSIGNMENT DIFFICULTY ON STUDENT SELF-EFFICACY AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Assignments are an important part of the marketing curriculum in most universities. One of the greatest advantages of assigning difficult assignments for an instructor early in the semester is that they set expectations high for what is expected over the entire course. By contrast, giving a first assignment that is relatively easy may set the expectation that the course will be a "gut course," one that students can pass with relatively little work. This paper suggests that the ordering of difficulty of assignments can affect student's self-efficacy about the class. This impact on self-efficacy may affect overall performance in the class.

Student confidence is a big barrier for some segments of the student population, especially first generation students (Cushman, 2007), which are those students whose parents have not had more than a high school education. First generation students tend not only to have lower levels of confidence, their attrition rates are also higher in college, which is to say they are less likely to graduate once they have started (Ishitani, 2006). This is critical because college study is a more important source of cultural capital for first generation students than for students whose parents have completed a college education (Pascarella et al., 2004). In fact, research has started to identify educational approaches that can increase the confidence of first generation university students in their ability to control their educational progress (James et al., 2006).

ORDER EFFECTS AND SELF-EFFICACY

A look at the order effects literature shows that there can be effects on survey responses of the order of questions, even if the questions are exactly the same. There have been contrast effects and assimilation effects. Contrast effects find greater differences between questions due to their ordering. Assimilation effects occur when responses to a later question are closer to an earlier question than they would otherwise be due to order of placement on a survey. That is, questions need to be structured in such a way that previous response to a question will

not influence responses to questions taken later on the questionnaire.

Assignments such as exams and papers can vary in difficulty as well from the near impossible to those in which most students get full credit. Is it possible that the mere placement of assignments by difficulty in a course can influence the outcome even if the assignments are exactly the same? This paper suggests that it may do so by affecting the self-efficacy of students.

METHOD

The assignment of a quiz was used to assess the effects of question order on students' self-efficacy about and performance on classroom assignments.

Students were given extra credit to fill out an online survey about a type of assignment. They were assigned randomly to one of two conditions, a "difficult assignment" condition and a "regular assignment" condition. Students in both conditions were given the same extra credit points to complete the assignment. Students in both conditions were given exactly the same type of assignment except that the assignment was more difficult in the "difficult assignment" condition. After reading about the assignment, students completed a series of measures assessing their thoughts, perceptions and emotions about the assignment.

RESULTS

Students do not expect to perform as well on difficult assignments and they dislike instructors who give them. Students who faced difficult assignments also expected to spend less time than those who faced the regular assignments. The implications of these findings are that the ordering of assignments needs to be from at least an average level of difficulty to more difficult. In this way, students can have a sense of achievement and control, as well as a sense of self-efficacy over their performance in that course.

References Available on Request.