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A Three-Pronged Approach to Helping Students Internalize APA Style based in Self-Determination Theory

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A Three-Pronged Approach to Helping Students Internalize APA Style based in Self-Determination Theory

Abstract

The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) is an invaluable resource for students and faculty members in the social sciences. However, many students and researchers fail to recognize the value of APA style in supporting writing excellence. In this research note we describe an innovative pedagogical approach to APA style that is rooted in self-determination theory. We provide preliminary retrospective evidence of internalization through students' responses to questionnaire items and a student's personal reflection.

Le manuel des publications de l'American Psychological Association (APA) est une ressource inestimable pour les étudiants et les professeurs en sciences sociales. Toutefois, un grand nombre d'étudiants et de chercheurs ne se rendent pas compte de la valeur du style APA pour soutenir l'excellence en rédaction. Dans cette note de recherche, nous décrivons une nouvelle approche pédagogique à l'égard du style APA qui est enracinée dans la théorie de l'auto-détermination. Nous présentons des preuves préliminaires rétrospectives d'assimilation par le biais de réponses d'étudiants à un questionnaire ainsi qu'une réflexion personnelle d'étudiants.

Keywords

APA Style, Self-determination Theory, pedagogy, basic psychological needs; Style APA, théorie de l'auto-détermination, pédagogie, besoins psychologiques de base

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to acknowledge Michele Wygera-Schuster for her unwavering commitment to teach young children to write for the first time. Her tangible and visual strategies for teaching writing partly inspired the approach described herein. Dr. Daniels' motivation research is supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada Insight Grant (435-2015-0216).

It is common to see the following instructions at the bottom of written assignments in psychology courses: “Please complete this assignment according to APA standards.” Although these eight words appear straightforward, they send many students into a tizzy. All graduate students at some point agonize about writing “according to APA standards.” It seems that while most students begrudgingly try to correctly format their papers according to APA style, few of them recognize that the manual is “an authoritative source on all aspects of scholarly writing, from the ethics of duplicate publication to the word choice that best reduces bias in language” (American Psychological Association/APA, 2010, p. 3). The goal of this research note is to present retrospective preliminary findings of a pedagogical innovation in which an instructor intentionally supported students’ basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000) while teaching APA style.

Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a contemporary approach to human motivation that is regularly applied to classrooms to describe students’ achievement motivation and offer suggestions to support it (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). According to SDT, the most adaptive form of motivation is intrinsic (also called autonomous or self-determined) – a type of motivation that originates from within the person making behaviours pleasant and enduring because they align with the person’s perceptions of the self. In other words, people are engaged simply because they care about the activity itself. At the other end of the motivation spectrum is extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation can be regulated in many ways including through rewards, desire to please others, or pursuit of higher goals. All forms of extrinsic motivation originate outside of the person, meaning that the individual is engaged for some reason other than caring about the activity itself. SDT explains that extrinsically regulated activities can become more intrinsic through a process of internalization as a person’s basic psychological needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence are satisfied (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). Relatedness refers to experiencing close and caring connections to others. Autonomy refers to having a sense of volitional control over one’s behaviours. Competence refers to experiencing success and mastery. Inasmuch as students may be externally motivated to adhere to APA style, modifying instruction so that it supports basic psychological needs could allow students to become more intrinsically motivated towards APA style.

Common APA Errors

Lists of common APA errors are shared informally through blog posts (Walburg, 2018) or published formally as manuscripts (Mandernach, Zafonte, & Taylor, 2016) each year. Although errors related to reference lists and in-text citations regularly top these lists, the next set of errors relate to expression and writing (Mandernach et al., 2016). The instructor targeted six specific APA writing errors: passive voice, anthropomorphism, incomplete comparisons, lack of parallel form, split infinitives, and word choice.

Method

Because student responses to the instructional design were anecdotally positive, we felt it was important to briefly, albeit retrospectively, evaluate the pedagogical approach. Through this we hoped to both disseminate the preliminary impact of the instructional design as well as

determine ways to advance the instructional innovation as application of scholarship (Glassick, 2000). Our research question was: Did students learn about APA style in a way that supported their basic psychological needs and intrinsic motivation? Table 1 contains information on the instructional strategies used to support each basic psychological need mapped onto the survey items used to measure need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation retrospectively.

Participants and Instructional Innovation

Fifteen students enrolled in a required doctoral level research seminar received the SDT-informed instructional innovation on APA style. The instruction was designed to present APA style content in a way that intentionally supported students' relatedness, autonomy, and competence. To meet students' need for relatedness the instructor began by breaking down the stigma associated with struggling with writing (Pinker, 2014) by sharing her personal experiences. To meet students' need for autonomy, the instructor embedded explanatory rationales into didactic teaching on each of the six specific APA errors. Explanatory rationales have been shown to help meet students' basic psychological need for autonomy because students come to appreciate *why* a topic is important (Su & Reeve, 2011). For each of the six APA errors, the instructor taught students through lecture and PowerPoint slides (1) why the error is a problem, (2) common reasons for the error, (3) how to identify the error, and (4) how to fix the error. To meet the need for competence, attentive practice (Van Note Chism & Weerakoon, 2012) was used by requiring students to revise each of the three writing assignments in the course. Students were asked to physically identify through highlighting, circling, or underlining any instances of the respective six APA errors and then correct them in the revision, which was ultimately graded.

Procedure and Materials

Four months after the course, the instructor sent an online survey to all students to measure their retrospective self-perceptions of need satisfaction through the instruction on APA style. Eleven of the 15 students completed the survey. The instructor had shared personal perspectives to support relatedness. As such, satisfaction of relatedness was measured by one item: How much did you feel like you could admit your strengths and weaknesses about writing (1 = not at all; 10 = completely)? The instructor had used explanatory rationales to support autonomy. As such, satisfaction of autonomy was measured by one item linked to explanatory rationales: How much did you know about why APA errors were problematic (1 = nothing; 10 = a lot)? The instructor had used attentive practice to support competence. As such, satisfaction of competence was measured by two summed items linked to attentive practice: How well could you (1) identify and (2) correct APA error (1 = not well; 10 = very well)? To measure intrinsic motivation, we asked one question: How much did you care about APA writing errors and expression (1 = not at all; 10 = very much)? In the same survey, students completed all the items first thinking about "before the instruction" and then again thinking about "after the instruction." These retrospective perspectives functioned as one source of data.

In order to provide a richer description, the instructor invited one student to write personal reflections on how her basic psychological needs were supported through the instruction. At the same time, the instructor offered the student authorship on this paper, which she (Kennedy) accepted. Although this created a potential bias, the two had worked intensely on the student's writing throughout the semester, and Kennedy felt able to reflect professionally on her experiences,

although they were indeed positive at the outset. Kennedy completed her reflections prior to looking at retrospective survey data.

Plan for Analyses

We ran three paired samples *t*-tests to examine the change in students' retrospective self-reported basic psychological need satisfaction before and after instruction. Then the instructor merged the retrospective numeric and reflective data into a single narrative. We present the two sources of evidence concurrently as evidence of how the SDT-informed pedagogical innovation met psychological needs and increased intrinsic motivation for APA style.

Results

Because relatedness was foundational to the instruction, we only asked the students to indicate their feelings of relatedness once. Retrospectively, students reported feeling very safe in being honest about their writing. See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics before and after instruction and *t*-test statistics.

In her reflection, Kennedy reported:

I felt immediately relieved by the instructor's comments regarding her struggles with writing. I had known for a long time that my writing was something I needed to focus on and, for the first time, I felt I was not alone in my need to do so. The instructor's comments left me feeling optimistic that I would develop the skill set necessary to improve the overall quality of my writing and have more confidence when approaching writing tasks in the future.

In terms of autonomy, Kennedy reflected:

As a student, when I learned the reason behind APA style recommendations such as avoiding passive voice and anthropomorphism, it made me realize that by adhering to the recommendations I would be able to improve the delivery of my written message to its intended audience. Once I had this understanding of why APA style recommendations were important, I was eager and empowered to begin incorporating the recommendations that I often neglected in my writing.

Table 1

Instructional Design Elements, Descriptive Statistics from the Survey, and Statistics Results (n = 11)

SDT Construct	Instructional Strategy	Survey Item	<i>Before instruction</i>		<i>After instruction</i>		<i>t</i> statistic, <i>df</i> = 10
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Relatedness	Reduce Stigma Share struggles	How much did you feel like you could admit your strengths and weaknesses about writing?	--	--	8.91	1.04	--
Autonomy	Didactic instruction Rationales	How much did you know about why APA errors were problematic?	5.27	1.42	8.18	1.88	-4.04*
Competence	Intentional revision	Summed: How well could you (a) identify and (b) correct APA errors?	9.81	3.99	17.00	3.71	-5.25*
Intrinsic Motivation	Support basic psychological needs	How much did you care about APA writing errors and expression?	5.91	2.25	8.91	.09	-4.97*

* $p < .01$

Quantitatively, students' scores increased on average by 2.91 points on the rating scale in terms of understanding the reasons for APA style rules following instruction.

All students reported self-perceived improvement in their skills related to identifying and correcting errors with an average increase of 7.18 points. In her reflection, Kennedy stated:

Like many doctoral students, I rarely leave time for editing when I finish assignments never mind leaving time for attentive revision. By being “forced” to not only hand in a revision, but actually edit the expression of writing, I became aware of the alarming number of APA style errors I was committing in my writing. This exercise seemed excessive at first, but it was highly beneficial by showing me that I actually could improve my writing.

A hallmark of intrinsic motivation is that the behaviour originates from the person – they care about what they are doing for its own sake. Quantitatively students increased their original endorsement of caring by on average 3.00 points on the rating scale. Kennedy reflected on how being more intrinsically motivated to improve specific parts of her writing has extended beyond the completion of the course:

I became aware of my most common APA style errors and created a personal “correction table” for easy and future reference. This method of teaching APA style writing through meeting psychological needs has brought me to a place where I no longer think of APA style as a set of basic rules but as something that is seamlessly part of my academic and professional goals.

Discussion

In this research note, we described an instructional innovation informed by SDT that appears to meet students' basic psychological needs and help them be more intrinsically motivated (i.e., “care”) about APA style. Each of the strategies selected to support students' basic psychological needs was more highly endorsed after instruction than before instruction, suggesting that students positively responded to the strategies. In the next course offering and in formalizing this scholarship of teaching and learning (Glassick, 2000), it will be critical to explicitly connect the instructional strategies to the basic psychological needs. Existing questionnaires with evidence of validity such as the Basic Need Satisfaction in General Scale (Johnston & Finney, 2010) would be suitable for this task. Likewise, basic psychological needs must be linked more directly to the type of motivation students have towards APA style. To test this, data that can be used in inferential analyses, as well as students' own expressions of motivation quality, will be required throughout the instruction. Finally, the impact of need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation on APA style execution must be tested by collected and analyzing samples of student work.

Limitations and Conclusion

From a research perspective, there are many limitations to this report. To name only a few, we did not collect or analyze samples of students' work, there was no control group that received traditional instruction, the sample was homogeneous, small, and from a single institution, and the in-depth reflection was provided by only one student, Kennedy, which introduced an element of unreliability into the results. Notwithstanding, from the perspective of innovative pedagogy, there

is room for excitement based on these preliminary findings. Based on our experiences as the instructor and as a student, as well as the responses from the other students on the retrospective survey, we are optimistic that instruction informed by SDT will help students internalize the otherwise extrinsic activity of adhering to APA style. Instructors can support this process of internalization by not only focusing on developing competence but also supporting students' basic psychological needs of relatedness and autonomy.

The descriptions provided herein can provide the basis for more rigorous tests of this pedagogical innovation related to APA style specifically at different levels of university, with larger samples, and in comparison to traditional instructional methods. Additionally, the principles of SDT can be used to help students internalize otherwise external learning activities in any content domain. As SDT-informed instruction gains momentum, instructors and researchers should collect ongoing data from students during the course itself rather than retrospectively and intentionally link this type of scholarship to Glassick's (2000) standards.

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