Using Vignettes To Build and Assess Teacher Understanding of Instructional Strategies

Carolyn Jeffries

Dale W. Maeder

California State University, Northridge

University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

In the last fifty years, the use of stories in education has included vignettes as an effective stimulus for discussion of real-life contexts and problems. However, vignettes have rarely been used as an assessment tool and there is no reported consensus on their definition and design. This article documents the use of vignettes as an effective method of assessing pedagogical understanding in our teacher development courses from 1995-2003, suggesting that vignettes are significantly correlated with more traditional forms of assessment, are highly predictive of course-ending project performances, and represent an episode of learning in their own right. Finally, we propose a more concise definition and a more rigorous course of study for vignette development and implementation.

A critical theme of institutions of higher education in the preparation and continuing education of teachers is that educational research informs and is informed by practice. Identifying and assessing what and how teachers learn during their professional development is an important component in assisting them to better teach their students. The use of stories in various formats has long been a powerful and successful method for modeling, teaching, and researching behavior and understanding in general education, health sciences, social sciences, and behavioral sciences.

One type of story, the vignette, has been used in the social sciences and more recently in the health and education fields as a reflective, research, and modeling tool (Callicott, 2003; Campbell, n.d.; Chambers, 1999; Galguera, 1998; Hughes & Huby, 2002; King, Murray, Salomon, & Tandon, 2002a; Kruse, 1997; New Hampshire Equity Handbook Writing Team, n.d.; Pransky & Bailey, 2002; Schwartz & Riedesel, 1994; TESOL, 2001; Vaughn & Klingner, 1999; Volkmann, 1998). Researchers and educators have found vignettes to be very effective in these contexts for several reasons: vignettes are relatively easy to construct, they provide a useful focus and stimulus for discussion, they are valuable in addressing difficult-toexplore and sensitive topics, they can be used with individuals and groups, and they reflect real-life

contexts and problems.

Vignettes have rarely been reported as a means of assessing mastery of course content. Furthermore, there are few definitions or construction criteria for vignettes in these contexts, and certainly no reported consensus on their definition and design. Given the benefits of using vignettes in research, modeling, discussion, and reflection, and the need to determine teacher qualification, it is important to determine whether vignettes can also be an effective assessment tool in teacher education.

An important step in this process is the collection of evidence that vignettes are a reliable assessment tool that complements more traditional assessment styles. In addition, it should be determined whether vignettes can augment the information gathered in more traditional assessments. Besides content and skill mastery, do vignettes help to measure affective goals, such as the motivation to learn? Do vignette assessments provide evidence of problem solving and critical thinking?

Furthermore, it is critical to determine if vignettes can assist in state-mandated assessment of teacher understanding of pedagogy. The challenge of assessing portfolios may be partially addressed through vignette scoring guides that quantify responses that are unique and authentic. Finally, vignettes should be studied for evidence of an assessment as an episode of learning. Does an assessment task that encourages modeling, rehearsal, and transfer provide more opportunities for learning than more traditional forms of assessment, (e.g., multiple-choice, fill-in items)?

Since 1995, we have been using vignettes as a method of assessing pedagogical understanding in teacher development courses. We believe the vignette to be a highly effective assessment tool and suspect that vignettes have a strong predictive component as well as provide a rich learning experience for eliciting and promoting teacher understanding. We would like to share our experiences and data with teacher educators and researchers in order to propose a course of study on the use of vignettes in assessing pedagogical understanding in teacher education programs. Based on the literature and our experiences, we would also like to propose a more concise definition and establish more rigorous criteria for vignette development and implementation in this assessment process.

Review of Literature

Stories as Educational Tools

A story is defined by Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Cambridge University Press, 2003) as "a description, either true or imagined, of a connected series of events and, often, the characters involved in them." Stories have been used in many different forms and formats as a powerful and successful method for modeling, teaching, and researching behavior and understanding in general education, health sciences, social sciences, and behavioral sciences. Story formats include case studies, long narrative descriptions of real or hypothetical situations in which learners are asked to identify or solve a problem (Gideonse, 1999; Hrabe, Kinzie, & Julian, 2001; Jackson, 1998; Loughner, Harvey, & Mil-heim, 2001; Marsick, 1998); case stories, stories that simulate the real world but are written by individuals within the classroom and told from their perspectives (Hunter & Hatton, 1998; Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 1998); scenarios, narrative descriptions that contain a set of realistic assumptions and facts about the future used to provide a unified context for decision-making (International Centre for Development Oriented Research in Agriculture, n.d.; Pesonen, n.d.), and vignettes.

Vignettes in Education and Research

A recent review of the literature on vignettes revealed a wide range of definitions, usage, construction, testing, and examples. Definitions were rarely provided and varied greatly, which caused confusion of vignettes with other types of stories. In fact, many studies and articles used the terms case study, case story, scenario, and vignette interchangeably, incorrectly, or uniquely, (e.g., Jackson, 1998; Kruse, 1997; Walen & Hirstein, 1995; Weigle & Scotti, 2000; Weiner, Rand, Pagano, Obi, Hall, & Bloom, 2001).

Broadly defined, vignettes are "short stories about hypothetical characters in specific circumstances to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond...moving from the abstract to context-specific" (Finch, 1987, p. 106). Vignettes consist of text, images, or other forms of stimuli, ranging from short written prompts to live events, to which research participants are asked to respond (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Herman (1998) uses the term case vignette to describe a written description, photograph, or videotaped scene as a brief glimpse of an educational situation. Campbell (n.d.) comes closest to an operational definition:

A vignette is a short story without an ending. It is short, but not too short to present an issue. It is detailed, but not so detailed that the underlying issue gets lost. A vignette presents an issue, such as the under-representation of girls in advanced math courses, in a context with which individuals can identify. A good vignette has fewer complexities and personalities than real life, sets up a situation in which there is no one "right" answer, and is flexible enough that individuals from different groups (teacher/administrator, female/male, liberal/ conservative) can identify with the story and bring their perspective forward in discussions of solutions. (p. 2)

Vignette Construction and Design

In addition to a lack of consensus on vignette definition, there was a noticeable lack of information on how vignettes were constructed or should be constructed. When using vignettes to promote discussion and problem solving concerning equity in math and science education, Campbell (n.d.) proposed a vignette construction process and shared samples of vignettes for different target groups, (e.g., administrators, teachers, students, parents, policy makers, researchers). She listed three major steps in creating vignettes: determine issues and areas of concern, develop situations that are realistic and relevant, and test the vignettes on groups similar to those who will be using them (Campbell, n.d.).

In their review of the use of vignettes as a research tool in the behavioral sciences and health care, Richman and Mercer (2002) proposed an alignment along eight axes in the construction and application of vignettes. These axes addressed the function of the vignette, method of implementation, collection, type of respondents, content covered, time available, type of response elicited, and ethical issues. Richman and Mercer put forth the design issue of whether to use already existing data in the construction of the vignette or to construct material suited to the specific purpose. They also posed the question of vignette delivery media—written documents, audiovisual, or oral while stating that the literature strongly suggested that vignettes are usually given in written documents of varying lengths.

In their review of the application of vignettes in social and nursing research, Hughes and Huby (2002) addressed the differences between vignettes and real life processes and explored some practical advantages and pitfalls of using vignettes. They found that vignettes provided a useful focus and stimulus for discussion, may be constructed from unrealistic events and real life events, were valuable in detecting subtleties and nuances, and were useful in addressing difficult-to-explore and sensitive topics. The issues they presented in constructing effective vignettes included making the topics and contexts relevant to the audience and addressing the readers abilities and styles.

King, Murray, Salomon, and Tandon (2002b) addressed similar issues when constructing vignettes for surveys: how and when to address

the vignette character's intellectual, cultural, and religious background as well as physical attributes and personal information. They recommended that vignettes be written so that people from different backgrounds could understand them as similarly as possible, that details be scrutinized to avoid introducing unwarranted assumptions, and that vignette characters be as similar as possible to the audience.

When authors did provide samples of their vignettes, a wide range of formats were found that included short and long dialogues, formulas, pictures, and short and long narratives with and without follow-up questions. Vignettes ranged from 25 to 1000 words in length. The accompanying questions and tasks varied in terms of number, length, type, and amount of detail.

Vignette Usage

The lack of consensus of vignette definition and format may be due to its diverse usage across fields that seldom overlap or confer with one another. Vignettes have been used in the social sciences since the 1950's (Hughes & Huby, 2002) and more recently in the health sciences to model best practices (Callicott, 2003; Orlander, Gupta, Fincke, Manning, & Hershman, 2000), to describe common situations and conditions (Pickett, Streight, Simpson, & Brison, 2003; Stelmachers & Sherman, 1990), to study technique effectiveness (Goldie, Schwartz, McConnachie, & Morrison, 2001), and to identify attitudes and beliefs (Sleed, Durrheim, Kriel, Solomon, & Baxter, 2002; Thurber, Heller, & Hinshaw, 2002).

Vignettes have also been used in the field of education as models of effective teaching (TESOL, 2001; Vaughn & Klingner, 1999), to identify and study attitudes and beliefs (Galguera, 1998; Schwartz & Riedesel, 1994), and as a tool to support teachers in their development, reflection, and problem-solving abilities (Campbell, n.d.; Kruse, 1997; New Hampshire Equity Handbook Writing Team, n.d.; Pransky & Bailey, 2002; Volkmann, 1998). Only a few instances of vignettes used to assess knowledge were found, (e.g., Cohen, Shete, Seal, Daum, & Lauderdale, 2003), and those were in the health field.

Vignettes as a Written Assessment Tool in Teacher Development

Richman and Mercer's (2002) view of vignettes as a feasible alternative to observation and a flexible and fertile component of qualitative research suggests that a vignette analysis assignment might be an assessment tool to complement more traditional forms of content or skill mastery. Research conducted in the fields of health and behavioral science (Hughes & Huby, 2002) suggests that vignettes could be used as an assessment tool to collect evidence of mastery of skills, terms, and concepts for the following reasons:

- 1. Vignettes provide a useful focus and stimulus for discussion.
- 2. Vignettes may be constructed from unrealistic events and real life events.
- 3. Vignettes are valuable in detecting subtleties and nuances.
- 4. Vignettes are useful in addressing difficult-toexplore and sensitive topics.
- 5. Vignettes can quickly generate considerable amounts of data from a large participant group.
- 6. Vignettes can be defined and standardized to enable all participants to respond to the same stimulus.
- 7. Vignettes do not necessarily require participants to have in-depth knowledge of the topics under study.

Given the positive aspects of vignette use, we performed an analysis of data collected between 1998–2003 in two online teacher education courses that used vignettes as an assessment task to elicit teacher pedagogical understanding. Based on the research literature and our experiences and results, we believe that vignettes are a strong candidate for assessing teacher understanding and predicting appropriate teacher implementation of instructional strategies.

Method

Vignette Definition and Construction Criteria

We define vignettes as incomplete short stories that are written to reflect, in a less complex way, reallife situations in order to encourage discussions and potential solutions to problems where multiple solutions are possible.

The five criteria for this type of vignette are:

- (1) It is a story. It is a narrative but not a dialogue, case study, case story, or scenario.
- (2) It is short. Its length is 50-200 words.
- (3) It is relevant. It simplifies a real-life situation that is relevant to participants but one in which no participant is likely to have expertise.
- (4) It allows for multiple solutions/answers and is intended to encourage independent thinking and unique responses. It includes a prompt with instructions and a set of tasks, i.e., specific issues to be addressed in the participant's response directly connected to a scoring guide.

The use of vignettes creates an assessment situation where authenticity of authorship is less likely to be compromised. Unlike forced-choice assessment, (e.g., true/false, multiple-choice, fillin), vignette responses are open-ended and allow for more unique demonstrations of content mastery. Each participant chooses and defends a position during the analysis of the vignette. The evaluator uses a scoring guide to verify content mastery and determine if the work has been plagiarized from a classmate or another source.

(5) It is purposely incomplete. It can be truncated — plot line stops at a critical juncture and participants complete the vignette - or abridged — story's details are omitted so that multiple interpretations can be defended.

In a truncated vignette participants are asked to complete a storyline according to a set of criteria defined by the course curriculum. Truncated vignettes are typically used to evaluate process, rather than product, i.e., examining a student's completion of the storyline to assess if a particular problem-solving skill has been mastered. In an abridged vignette participants are asked to demonstrate mastery of course content by answering specific questions concerning the vignette and justifying their positions. Abridged vignettes are typically used to evaluate product, rather than process, i.e., examining a student's analysis of a situation to assess if specific knowledge has been mastered.

The following truncated vignette concerning classroom management is drawn from a teacher development course taught by one of the researchers:

A colleague of yours, Bernie Bunsen, is a middle school science teacher who designates the last 30 minutes of each class meeting for one week to complete lab activities on the various states of water. To the delight of his classmates, one student has been fooling around during the lab time, tossing ice cubes around the room, sabotaging the fog machine, disrupting other group work, etc. Some of his classmates are starting to imitate him to get the same reactions from others. Mr. Bunsen is obviously concerned about the lack of productive work getting done as well as the safety hazards caused by the misbehavior. Mr. Bunsen has confided in you that he is deciding among several options: send the lead misbehaving student out of the classroom for detention during lab time, assign him more science work, fail him on the lab assignment, punish the entire class for the misbehavior, speak privately with the student, speak with the entire class about the misbehavior and the importance of safety measures, give the student the option of re-submitting his lab work for a partial score increase.

Complete the following tasks:

(1) Using the information provided in this week's readings, identify the type of misbehavior or mistaken behavior the disruptive student in the vignette is exhibiting and discuss possible causes for his behav-

- ior. Be sure to identify clues in the vignette, information from the readings, or assumptions you made to defend your response.
- (2) Choose from Mr. Bunsen's options, the readings' list of classroom management strategies, and/or your own ideas to recommend a set of options for Mr. Bunsen. Be sure to defend your selections.

Note the range of possible responses to these tasks. Although the classroom management problem is clearly identified in the vignette, the cause is not and there are numerous ways for Mr. Bunsen to solve the problem, e.g., clarify the assignment, remind students of consequences, be consistent and caring with the students, and help the misbehaving student change his behavior.

The truncated vignette task is more openended than that of the abridged vignette, which provides scaffolding for multiple interpretations linked to the course content. The following abridged vignette concerning scaffolding is drawn from the same teacher development course:

Random Guess is a high school math teacher who provides a free, two-hour problem-solving workshop for juniors and seniors preparing for their college admissions exams. Once a week after school during the fall semester, students meet with Mr. Guess to work on sample math problems. This year, he has decided to try out some new techniques in his workshop. In addition to simply answering questions posed by the students concerning problems in a handout that he has given them the prior week, he has decided to (a) review a math topic; (b) solve one or two related problems on the board while thinking out loud; (c) work with the class to solve several more problems on the board; (d) administer a short individual quiz of selected problems; and (e) review the quiz problems before handing out next week's handout of problems.

Complete the following tasks:

(1) Analyze what Mr. Guess is doing to help these

students learn in terms of Vygotsky's theories and their instructional implications in relation to scaffolding and social learning. Be sure to defend your answer with examples, clues in the vignette, or assumptions that you have made.

(2) Describe two ways Mr. Guess could modify his instructional plan to promote input from others.

Note again the range of possible responses to these tasks. There are several clues within the vignette to indicate evidence of scaffolding in Mr. Guess' teaching and there are numerous ways to promote student input, e.g., cooperative learning groups, student demonstrations, teach-back activities.

Vignettes differ from case studies which are longer, more detailed reports to be analyzed and discussed. Nor is the vignette a case story which is written by the student-participant and focuses on his/her perspective. Finally, vignettes are distinguished from scenarios which are futurebased stories.

Setting and Context

Evidence supporting the use of vignettes as an effective learning tool and means of assessing participants' pedagogical understanding was collected in over 30 sections of two online teacher education courses between 1998 and 2003. The participant population consisted of employed school teachers, college instructors, and corporate trainers. The lectures and the use of vignettes as a teaching and assessment tool in the two courses were identical. Course topics included models of learning theory, models of teaching theory, the application of learning theory to online education, and distance learning assessment theory.

Course assessment included two vignette assignments, a midterm, two additional vignette assignments, and a final project. The midterm included four vignettes to be analyzed as well as five essay questions. The final project was the creation of a detailed proposal for an online course or training program.

Vignette Assignment Descriptions

In the first and second vignette assignments (abridged), the participants were given descriptions of teaching situations and asked to classify and evaluate one of them in terms of various issues of teaching and learning theory. Each vignette's description was purposely vague so that various interpretations were possible, allowing the participant to find clues in the vignette description that indicated the presence of a learning strategy. In the third and fourth vignette assignments (truncated), participants were asked to adapt a hypothetical online lesson to fit a specific learning theory and then create an assessment plan for measuring participant performance. The vignettes were scored by the instructor using a scoring guide, (see Table A1 in the Appendix), which weighed the defense of a choice more heavily than a particular choice. These vignette assignments were therefore used to measure mastery of course content and transfer of those concepts to new contexts.

Results

To collect evidence of reliability of the vignette as an assessment tool, means and correlation coefficients were calculated using data for each of the participants' four vignette scores, (a cumulative vignette score with 100 possible points), a midterm score (100 possible points), and a final project score (100 possible points). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Mean vignette, midterm, and final project scores were not significantly different across the two courses. Moreover, when comparing earlier sections of each course (1998-2000) to more recent sections (2000-2003), mean scores were not significantly different. These findings together suggested that the scoring guides for the various assignments were consistently administered from section to section and from course to course over the years and that any differences in the participant populations did not significantly affect vignette, midterm, or project performances. The data for all 610 participants were therefore considered collec-

Cumulative vignette scores (M = 91.77, SD =6.24) were not significantly different from midterm scores (M = 92.00, SD = 4.32) or final project scores (M = 92.71, SD = 5.22). Intercorrelations between cumulative vignette and midterm scores were r = .27, p < .0001, between cumulative vignette and final project scores r = .21, p < .0001, and between midterm and final project scores r =.09, p < .03.

Since there was a significant overlap of course content between the vignettes and the midterm, it was expected that their pairing would produce the greatest correlation coefficient. There was less content overlap between the final project and the earlier assessments. It was nevertheless noteworthy that the correlation coefficient between the vignette scores and the final project scores was nearly the same as the vignette-midterm correlation, while the midterm and final project scores produced a much smaller correlation coefficient. These findings suggested that the vignette score was better than the midterm as a predictor of final project performance.

Vignette scores were then sorted into three groups (lower, average, higher) to see if vignette scores could successfully predict midterm and project scores. Mean midterm and final project scores were significantly different among the three sorted vignette groups. When midterm scores were sorted into three groups using the same cutoff values, mean final project scores were not significantly different among the three midterm groups. These two findings again suggested that the vignette score was better than the midterm as a predictor of final project performance.1

In each section of the two courses, approximately 10% of the participants posted incomplete responses to the first vignette assignment that needed to be resubmitted. These respondents initially failed to address all of the tasks in the instructions (e.g., not defending their choices with vignette clues). In all cases, resubmitted vignette scores were substantially higher. For these participants, the first vignette assignment evidently incorporated scaffolding as part of the learning technique. The 10% resubmission figure dropped to nearly zero on subsequent vignette assignments, which suggested that participants quickly learned how to complete vignette assignments.

Discussion

Preliminary results in two online teacher education courses indicated a significant link between vignette and midterm scores and suggested that vignettes may be a reliable assessment tool in measuring teacher pedagogical understanding and an area of research worth further study. Since 50% of the midterm points were vignette items, this correlation was a measure of reliability, i.e., the scoring guides were consistently used and participants tended to perform similarly on the two assessments. Since the final project was not vignette-related but measured the same course content, the correlation between vignette and final project scores was a measure of construct validity, i.e., evidence that supported decisions concerning final projects and overall course grades.

Vignette Assessment as a Learning Event

The re-submission data provided additional support to the notion that the vignette assessment is an episode of learning in and of itself. The participants quickly learned how to complete vignettes and remarked that they understood the course content much more clearly following the vignette assignment. Wolf (1993) refers to assessment as a "heads-on encounter with a culture's models of prowess. Assessments publish what we regard as skill and what we will accept or reject as a demonstration of accomplishment" (pp. 213-214). An assessment therefore allows students to see their work as someone else sees it.

The familiar assessments, e.g., standardized multiple-choice tests, are often the scapegoat example of assessment as a missed learning opportunity. Students are not always given samples of different levels of performance or the criteria that define those levels. They rarely see the test booklet again but instead are handed a brief summary report or, worse, just a score. Few are the opportunities to discuss problem-solving strategies or attempt a second try. Yet, the research is clear that worthwhile work requires incubation, revision, and collaboration.

Vignette assignments are particularly wellsuited to serving two learning purposes: as an opportunity to learn, they encourage reflection, rehearsal, motivation, and collaboration; and as an assessment tool, the detailed analysis behind the score allows for re-submitted work and further reflection. Wolf (1993) refers to a zig-zag path between assessment and instruction, considering which assessment practices will protect, nudge, and inform the students during the long course of work. As learners plot a course between humility and excellence, the assessment becomes an episode in which students learn how to write, conduct research, experiment, or solve problems along this zig-zag path.

One benefit of the vignette assignment is that the target of the assessment shifts so that instructors and learners rate performances. Assessments can promote higher-order critical thinking skills just as well as lectures or activities. The assessment episode is not necessarily a terminal one; the learning goes on. They need not be individualistic; collaboration keeps assessment dynamic. And the need for test security and authentic authorship is lessened; instructors can capture a much broader and more thorough set of snapshots of the learners' performances. As a result, the assessment's reliability is strengthened, making its inferences more valid.

Suggestions for Further Study

Based on these initial results we believe the vignette to be a highly effective assessment tool which has a strong predictive component and provides a rich learning experience for eliciting and promoting teacher understanding. Herman's (1998) case vignette research, involving a related instructional tool in a similar setting, suggests that vignettes help teachers apply theoretical constructs and research findings to classroom situations. We encourage teacher educators and researchers to engage in further study on the use of vignettes in assessing pedagogical reasoning in teacher education programs. Trends worthy of further investigation include vignette effectiveness in formative and summative assessment, in assessing problem-solving skills, and in assessing transfer of knowledge and skills from one educational setting to another.

Further research is suggested to isolate the study of vignettes from the following variables:

- delivery mode (face-to-face, online, blended, text-based, video)
- instructional method (lecture, instructormoderated discussion, learner-generated summaries)
- assessment type (learner-completed vignettes, learner-generated vignettes)
- vignette type (truncated vs. abridged)
- time mode (synchronous vs. asynchronous)
- collaboration (cooperative learning vs. collaborative assessment)
- content area (other than instructional development)

Furthermore, the following research issues need to be addressed:

- refining the definition of vignette
- refining the vignette scoring guide, including equating two or more vignettes used in the same assessment
- collecting evidence of the reliability of vignettes as an instructional and assessment tool
- collecting evidence of the validity of inferences made following vignette assessment, including course grades and teacher qualification decisions
- comparing vignette assessments with essays, summaries, and forced-choice test items

Conclusion

The beauty of the vignette activity is that, by its very nature, learners must transfer their learning to other situations and in doing so integrate their knowledge and skills well enough to make predictions about new situations. It is important to provide a scoring guide to the participants beforehand as well as some sample vignette responses to give them a clear indication of what comprises an effective vignette analysis. Although this entails time spent away from teaching course content, the potential for making the assessment activity an episode of learning and for encouraging transfer of learning to new situations is well worth the extra time.

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Author Note

Carolyn Jeffries, Assistant Professor, Michael D. Eisner College of Education, California State University, Northridge. Dr. Jeffries specializes in instructional design, educational psychology, and science instruction.

Dale W. Maeder, Instructor, Education Extension,

University of California, Los Angeles. Dr. Maeder specializes in web-based instructor development, problem solving, test preparation instruction, and mathematics instruction.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to

_Con-4576E63D1Dale Maeder Distance Learning Unit, UCLA Extension 10995 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024 E-mail: dmaeder@ucla.edu

Contact Information for Dr. Jeffries:

California State University, Northridge 18111 Nordhoff Street Northridge, CA 91330-8265 Voice Mail (818) 677-2835 Fax (818) 677-2544 Email: carolyn.jeffries@csun.edu

Footnotes

¹It was possible that the intercorrelations were significant due to the large data sample, (n = 610). Thirty random samples of 60 cases (~10% of the data sample) were therefore selected and analyzed. In 50% of the random samples, cumulative vignette scores were significantly correlated with final project scores and with midterm scores, (p < .05). Midterm scores however were significantly correlated with final project scores in only 17% of the random samples. These findings again suggested that the cumulative vignette score was better than the midterm as a predictor of final project performance and was an effective predictor of midterm performance as well.

Appendix

Table A1 Vignette Scoring Guide

Language (2 points) Language and phrasing are appropriate Construction underscores and enhances meaning Spelling is correct Punctuation is accurate Grammar and usage are correct
Comprehensiveness (3 points) Addresses the question Answers all parts of the question Includes appropriate references
Addresses at least two points of view when appropriate, including clear and focused statement of agreement/disagreement
Accuracy (2 points) Answers accurately portray the information Content is accurate Interpretation is accurate
Defense (3 points) Includes relevant evidence in support of each viewpoint Justifies answers using appropriate references to readings, theory, and research Includes relevant and accurate definitions and components of key terms Provides appropriate examples of key terms and issues Defines the problem and suggests viable resolutions
Final Score (10 points)
9-10 = A 8 = B 6-7 = C 5 = D 0-4 = F