

Increasing self-efficacy of first year seminar students: A case study

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted a case study of a first year Communication discipline specific seminar class to determine how the use of a common reader for the course affected students' self-efficacy. Using focus groups and an end of semester storytelling assignment, the authors collected data that revealed three themes: choice for participation, identity struggles, and college expectations. Whether or not the students read the common reader (*Paper Towns* by John Green) and whether or not they took a leadership role in preparing the public research presentation based on the reader, the focus group discussions allowed students to discuss self-identity issues, as well as their own college expectations. Feeling positive about their major, choice to live in the residence halls, friends, and programs of which they are a part helped the participating students feel they had made a competent choice. In assessing the themes that emerged, student self-efficacy was demonstrated in all three areas of self-determination theory: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, common reader, college retention

US News College Compass reports that “as many as 1 in 3 first-year students won’t make it back for sophomore year” and then displays on its website a list from highest retention rates for national universities to lowest rates (99% for Columbia to 58% for Texas Southern University; *US News* rankings, para 1). When Mount St. Mary’s University’s president’s negative remarks about the institution’s retention plan gained national attention (Brown, 2016), the controversy led to a number of discussions about how universities treat their first year students. There has also been new attention focused on the value of a college education and what skills are being developed by college students, leading Berrett (2016) to write: “If skills are the new canon, curricula as they’re now configured often fall short of instilling them” (A 25). Then there is the alarm sounded by Julie Lythcott-Haims (2015) who over her 10 years as a freshman dean at Stanford University has reached the conclusion that over-parenting has led to a generation of students who lack self-efficacy and are finding it difficult to accept the transition to adulthood. The college experience is often filled with uncertainty for first year students and could be one of the factors that impacts student retention. With these concerns (retention, engaging first year students in learning, developing and fostering marketable skills in students, and assisting them to make the transition to adulthood) we sought to discover how students claimed responsibility for their success or lack thereof. The authors conducted a case study of one first year seminar class to discover whether common reader exercises and student narrative might improve student self-efficacy. First, is a discussion Self-Determination Theory and the framework it provides for this study; second, is a discussion generational studies, particularly focusing on Millennials; next the methodological approach; and finally results are presented.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1997) has to do with an individual’s belief in his or her ability to execute behaviors necessary to reach specific goals. Self-efficacy has had a significant influence in research, education, and clinical practice, according to the American Psychological Association (n.d.). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is “an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of human’s evolved inner resources for personality development” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) identified three basic psychological needs that play a part in self-motivation and personality integration: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. As explained by Goldman and Brann (2016) “*competence* refers to feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions within a social environment”; “*relatedness* refers to feeling a connection with others”, and “*autonomy* refers to being the perceived source or origin of one’s own behavior and occurs when individuals see their actions as an expression of their true selves” (p. 3). Ryan and Deci (2000) point out that people whose motivation is authentic have “more interest, excitement, and confidence,” as compared to people who are “merely externally controlled for an action” (69). They go on to posit that Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) as a subtheory within SDT provides an explanation of the variability of intrinsic motivation. CET argues that social-contextual events which increase feelings of competence can enhance intrinsic motivation. However, feelings of competence, require a sense of autonomy. For intrinsic motivation to be enhanced tangible rewards, as well as threats, deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations and imposed goals should be diminished. Therefore, intrinsic motivation, according to Ryan and Deci will more likely occur in contexts where people feel a sense of

security and relatedness. First year seminars taught within the context of communication departments have the opportunity to provide that sense of security and feeling of connectedness.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand “refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 71). A self-determined form of extrinsic motivation is *regulation through identification*, meaning that the individual “reflects a conscious valuing of a behavioral goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important (p. 72). Researchers have discovered that more autonomous extrinsic motivation is associated with more engagement, better performance, and higher quality learning (p. 73). If communication instructors are to facilitate integration of extrinsic motivation into students’ learning, then the need to feel a connectedness with others is important for that internalization. Goldman and Brann (2016) focused on students enrolled in Communication Studies classes and identified four teaching practices which promoted autonomy: promoting diverse assignment topics, encouraging debates and discussion, eliciting and considering students’ opinions about assessment, and assessing students’ needs and adapting course policies and material around those needs. SDT provides an appropriate framework for this study because of the interest in helping students feel more confident as they work through their first year of college.

GENERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

For the focus on self-efficacy, the ongoing research about generational characteristics provides information about why first year students are challenged by assuming responsibility for their successes and failures. Jean Twenge (2006; 2013) has written about the entitlement she has observed in *Generation Me* and the obsession that young Americans have with themselves which she has dubbed *The Narcissism Epidemic*.

A study on Millennial media use and study habits noted that Millennial students rarely read newspapers or books, that they are used to being indulged as a result of child-rearing practices, that they expect to be coddled and think that they can multi-task, and that social interaction is key to their identities (Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, & Schlegel, 2011). This negative view of Millennials seems to carry over to the workplace. In their in-depth research project about workforce preparation, Bentley University (2014) concluded: “[T]he consensus, even among current students, recent college graduates and members of the business and higher education communities, is that the youngest members of the workforce are not in fact well prepared to begin their careers” (p. 20). The report states: “Millennials themselves give recent college graduates a grade of *C* or lower in preparedness for their first job” (p. 20). Helping students feel confident about their job preparation while giving them the tools to work with generational differences could be important to pedagogical strategies in the university.

The label which a generational cohort is rhetorically given is also revealing about attitudes about them. Rosa and Hastings (2016) interviewed 25 managers in the hospitality industry and found that “apart from *Millennial*, the most common identifier used across participants was *kids*” (p. 3). There is the sense that these young adults do not have a strong work ethic and that their managers do not think of them as adults. According to Brown (2013), “*Adult* isn’t a noun, it’s a verb. . . . The word *adulting* is taking a noun, *adult*, and making it a verb. . . . [A]*dult* isn’t something you are, it’s something you do” (p. 3). As explained by Lythcott-Haims (2015), “[A]n adult social role is one that is intrinsically not about *you*. . . . Inherent in these adult social roles is that you have responsibilities and obligations beyond your

personal care and pleasure” (p. 146). Self-efficacy is a means for supporting student acclimation to adulthood.

COMMON READER

With expectations from both within and outside the higher education context, the authors sought to examine what teaching and learning practices were currently being used and the impact that those practices had on first year students. Of particular interest to us was the teaching practice of having a common reader. Previously, our university had a university-wide common reader program in which a selected book was distributed to all incoming first year students, faculty and staff. The Common Reader program included an essay contest that was connected to the selected book with winning essay writers chosen for a study abroad experience which tied into a theme of the selected book. Because of staffing changes and changes in budgetary priorities, the Common Reader program was phased out in 2014. In an effort to replicate some of the student engagement previously associated with the Common Reader program, students enrolled in a Communication discipline specific section of the freshman seminar class were given a copy of the John Green (2008) novel, *Paper Towns*, and assigned to groups for a research poster presentation about characters in the novel. This study focuses on a single discipline specific section of the First Year Seminar taught at a regional university in the Southwest and asked the following question:

RQ: How do students develop self-efficacy through a common reader assignment in a freshman seminar class?

This study seeks to determine whether student self-efficacy is enhanced through group efforts based on a common reading assignment. The following details the method of data collection based on the course assignments.

METHOD

After securing approval from our university’s institutional review board, the authors conducted two focus groups with undergraduate students at a regional Southwestern university during the 2015 fall term. The 29 students enrolled in the first year seminar course also completed time diaries and 14 of those submitted semester story narratives for this study. This discipline specific freshman seminar class was a one semester hour credit class which met once a week for 14 weeks. *Paper Towns*, the book selected as the course common reader was introduced at the beginning of the semester, with the research assignment and group work occurring during the seventh week of classes. Students created research posters and displayed them in a public presentation at the university library. The semester story assignment was the final assignment for the semester and occurred during the 14th week with students submitting their written narratives through the course management system and giving a 5-minute oral presentation in class before their peers. The focus group discussions occurred during the sixth week of classes and were held during the regular class meeting time.

Description of Participants

All of the focus group participants, (n =29) were first year students. There were 14 males and 15 females. The ethnicity of participants was 55% (n =16) White, 24% (n = 7) Black, and 20% (n= 6) Hispanic. The average GPA of the 29 first year students enrolled in the first year seminar course was 2.43. Of those 29 first year students, 62% (n= 18) are returning for their

sophomore year. All of the students in the first year seminar class were communication studies or mass communication majors. All students fell within the traditional college age range of 18 to 24.

Focus Groups

The authors conducted two focus groups with 29 enrolled first year students. Questions asked by the moderators focused on the course assignment and the course reader, *Paper Towns*. This assignment was designed for students to integrate previous activities into the creation of a research poster that analyzed one of the major characters in John Green's novel. Students were asked to analyze the communication style of their assigned character, using their understanding of *StrengthsQuests*, Gretchen Rubin's four tendencies (2015), and the Color Code (1998) and to write an epilogue suggesting what the character would be doing a year after the conclusion of the novel.

StrengthsQuests had been adopted by the Office of Student Affairs who oversaw the summer new student orientation sessions for students. As part of their 2-day orientation, students took the Clifton StrengthsQuest exam and received the results for their top five qualities. Gallup's Clifton StrengthsFinder is an online measure of personal talent that includes 177 paired items. The developers of the measure have identified 35 themes with each of the statements on the measure being linked to one or more themes. As explained by Asplund, Lopez, Hodges and Harter (2009), the CSF "is often used as a starting point for self-discovery" (p. 9). Each student in the class had previously taken the CSF while participating in freshman orientation. Not surprisingly, most of them did not remember their top 5 traits, so the instructor reviewed the 35 themes as part of class discussion.

The instructor also introduced the concept of Gretchen Rubin's (2015) four tendencies. Students completed a quiz which allowed them to determine if they had tendencies that classified them as upholders, as questioners, as obligers or as rebels. Rubin's typology grew out of her desire to understand how people managed outer and inner expectations. As part of their research poster presentation, student groups were asked to determine which of the communication tendencies their assigned character displayed.

Additionally, students applied the understanding they gained from discussing the Color Code in class. Developed by Taylor Hartman (1998), the Color Code is a personality type profile with categories including Red (power), Blue (intimacy), White (peace), and Yellow (fun). Students completed the personality profile as part of an in-class discussion and then were asked to analyze the assigned character's communication in *Paper Towns* and determine which color best described that character's personality.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the focus groups included 15 pages for Focus Group 1 and 13 pages for Focus Group 2. Each of the focus groups met for 45 minutes. After the focus groups were transcribed by the first author, a preliminary framework for the study was determined. Independent of the first author, the second author analyzed the data and compared notes with the first author, both agreeing that self-efficacy was the dominant framework to emerge from the focus groups. The data were analyzed by reducing the data to prominent themes evident in the discussion (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Themes were written as headers while going line-by-line in

the transcriptions with exemplars of each theme noted below the headers. A second pass through the data included highlighting key passages as evidence of themes. The narratives that were analyzed were the written versions of the final Semester Story assignment which students submitted through the course management system. Narratives from the final assignment for the students were then analyzed based on the themes that emerged from the focus groups to further support any findings about the students' sense of self-efficacy.

Validation

To validate our findings, the first and third authors read through the analysis to make sure the findings agreed with the accounts from the focus groups. Any passages that did not seem to fit or were misleading were adjusted accordingly. The authors also provided thick description to further support the findings.

RESULTS

In the focus groups, the students were initially asked about their views on the common reader, *Paper Towns*. What emerged was a variation of those who had read the book and those who had not, those who enjoyed the book and those who did not, and those who were clearly going to be the leaders on the poster assignment to follow and those who would not be. (Based on what students said during the focus group discussions, the authors determined that about half of them had **not** read *Paper Towns*.) What was more interesting, however, was the discussion surrounding the book itself. Even those who had not read much of the book and/or did not see its relevance, clearly had opinions and viewpoints of the book's subject matter. In other words, the students were getting far more out of the assignment, whether they read the book or not, than most had realized. The following themes emerged: choice for participation, identity struggles, and college expectations. All names used are pseudonyms assigned by the researchers.

Choice for Participation

Not surprisingly, in both groups there were students who read the book and students who did not. The choice to participate varied based on whether students enjoyed the book or reading in general, laziness, and time constraints. Complicating this choice was the fact a group project depended on everyone reading the book.

One student stated, "I have a certain specific kind of book I like to read. If I can get into it in the first five pages, I'll continue reading," but *Paper Towns* was unable to capture this student's interest. Two students confessed they had opted for watching the movie, which may have approximated the story but didn't have the same effect as reading the book as a class. Mike pushed through because not reading the book might mean a bad grade, which "equals determination not to get [a] bad grade." Mike self-identified that he has Asperger's Syndrome and related to one of the characters who is "not very comfortable getting out of his comfort zone at first." Zack didn't think he was going to like the book and had contemplated not reading it, but was determined to finish and actually liked the book. Steve forced himself to keep reading but "didn't like it at all."

One of the particular challenges of this book selection was the students' ability to relate to the storyline and characters. Along with Mike who related to one of the characters, Elsa agreed that the book was relatable, but she first read it in high school so it was a better timing in

her opinion. She felt the book does focus on “dealing with problems in high school that you have to put up with, whether it be being socially rejected or being outcast from normal society or having a fixation on another person.” Anson could relate to the fact “you have to have an image” in high school. “You can’t be something out of the box because you don’t get any love from the majority so you have to act a certain way at school than what you do at home.” John didn’t relate to the book precisely because he took some time between high school and college, pushing the book further away from his realm.

But some had a far more positive experience with the book. Liz went so far as to say the book “inspired me to do what scares me and to be myself.” Anson similarly felt like the book inspired him: “I need to be a little bit more confident, stop thinking of myself like, you know, I’m pretty jack, like over the top as it is, there’s just sometimes when self-esteem gets to me kills my vibe.” Although some of the experiences of the characters in the book might not have resonated, the overarching themes of adventure and self-confidence did make some of the students think about their own choices.

Additionally, despite claims they didn’t like the book, students would come back to it regardless of the question asked. What was interesting is that the book generated conversation in ways the students didn’t even realize. Whether the book was boring or interesting, all were talking about what drew them in or left them unfulfilled. Even those who didn’t read the book read enough to participate. They soon acknowledged that having to come together to work on a project for a grade made them think more critically about the book.

So, if you knew that you were going to have to do something about it when you read it, it would help you think, while I am reading it, like help analyze the characters, and the development and pace and stuff like that, but if we wouldn’t have known that, I think it would have been a little harder to relate back to the class and um to the book as a whole.
(Mary)

In the end they could see how everyone picking something different created a different experience than if everyone has a common topic for discussion. “We all read the same book but interpreted it in different ways” (Sam). Although some still saw themselves divided into those who read and those who did not, the conversation revealed that most could see how reading the book together as a class was beneficial.

Identity Struggles

The book itself deals, in part, with the character identity struggles. Some were able to pick up and resonate with the book theme, but others felt it wasn’t representative of their high school experience – almost naively so. Mary claimed that she was never able to get into the coming-of-age books read in high school because “my high school was way too advanced for beliefs or the problems they put into [the books]. I just couldn’t relate.” Luke countered, “I find that really hard to believe that your high school was always perfect.” Mary acknowledged that “all high schools have bullies but it’s talking . . . not taking your lunch money.” What ensued from this conversation almost decried what they’d claimed about not reading the book or finding it relatable; a real discussion about identity, bullying, and prejudice took shape.

Sue claimed that there was no one popular clique in her school: “Like in my school there wasn’t one popular girl or one popular group of girls. Everybody was popular in their own kind of way.” Mike sarcastically noted, “Sounds like some sort of amazing school where there’s no type of prejudice.” These students and their peers began a discussion on the different experiences

of various schools; a discussion that might not have otherwise happened without the common reader. In a different conversation but similar topic, Anson said “when you’re in high school you know that you care about your status, you know that you have to keep this.” Students had experienced everything from the small rural school where students could be involved in a variety of activities, to larger schools where cliques were more prominent. The clash of experiences resulted in a fruitful exercise to begin the process of acknowledging variations in individual experiences.

The moderator asked whether it is possible reading these types of books helps understand the experiences of others. Mike immediately shared his hurt at the immaturity of others he encounters and it seemed he genuinely wanted others in his class to understand his experience. Luke more directly answered the question:

I think it’s important to read books like this because it’s been proven reading increases empathy when you’re able to put yourself in someone else’s position and I guess, I grew up reading everything I could get my hands on. And I believe that because I read so much, because I pseudo-experience all these different actions, different ideas, and I got a perspective about how their struggles and how they overcame their obstacles, it helps me relate better to what other people have gone through.

Students started to acknowledge how the common reader could help them consider experiences outside their own.

These discussions also brought forth identity outing for several individuals. Mike revealed his Asperger’s Syndrome as noted and John gave a highly personal account of his struggles with suicidal thoughts:

Because I really didn’t hit my stride until after high school was done and I had my bouts with suicidal thoughts and tendencies. After I had my bouts with that and ran clear of it, like, I kinda moved on from like high school. Like right after I graduated, I was gone. And that’s the first time I ever moved. And it was a bad transition. So, after I graduated from high school, when I went through my drama, uh, like reading this takes me back. But it takes me back to a time I don’t like to think about. Honestly and that’s just like a lot of bad things I just don’t like to think about.

Although John liked the book, he complained that the attempt to appeal to a wider audience detracted from the complexity of the issues the characters faced.

Anson also revealed some of his struggles moving to the university from a rural town just far enough away to find himself:

I just wanted to get out of my town. I’m gonna find myself right here [in college]. Because I’ve been faking it too much and I cared about my popularity and I wasn’t the best athlete but I was really good at going the section leaders and all this stuff and everything I did, with the school. I was well known in a small town. Oh, it was like, I wasn’t real myself. That was the problem. Which when I come to college, I’m gonna be like real, I’m gonna find myself, find what I like. I’m gonna hang out with people that are different, I’m gonna see everybody’s different point of views, I’m gonna listen to different music and all this stuff.

Although it wasn’t the intent of the assignment or even focus groups to necessarily encourage identity revelations, these students built on the themes they had been reading for weeks.

Expectations

The students talked about both college and parental expectations in their discussion of the book. Some acknowledged that they now have expectations of college they are expected to meet.

This is college and so the way that I saw it was oh, I've been assigned this book to read so I'm going to read it. And this is college and not everything is going to be catered to your exact interest. And so I was like, I'm going to do a project over this book so I'm going to read it and get the most out of it that I can so I can get a good grade on my project. That's the way I saw it. (Jim)

On the other hand, students mixed expectations with identity struggles. Some weren't sure what they were doing next and felt a little lost without adult guidance. Those whose parents offered little to no constructive direction seemed the most resigned: one floundered when his parents sought a place to retire, moving into his aunt's house and feeling unsupported in his community college; another had no guidance on completing the FAFSA; while a third was exceeding expectations as a first generation Latino student.

Liz discussed the high expectations her parents had and disappointments faced when she wasn't doing as well as they thought she should. Going to college, however, was a turning point as a first generation student.

The second group became a very personal cathartic confessional for the students. Anson stated: "I feel like at the end of the day, it's, no matter what parents expect, if you're going to college and you made it to college, you should do what makes you happy." Yet many in the room identified tensions between what they were choosing as their major and their parents' expectations.

DISCUSSION

As the focus groups progressed, it was clear the students were a little uncertain about the choice of a common reader for the class. Some easily made connections to the book and how it would help them in class, but others seemed to feel it was a waste of time. That which transpired in their conversations was actually far more instructive than what they seemed to initially believe about their participation. As posited by SDT, these students seemed to develop more competence, relatedness and autonomy based on their comments about the common reader.

Whether they chose to read the book, watch the movie, or opt out of reading more than the jacket cover, students were able to talk about the themes of the book. This might be, in part, because *Paper Towns* is a young adult coming-of-age novel with common tropes; that is, they didn't have to read it to get the gist of the plot. Their choices to participate in reading often had more to do with their determination to do well in the class than volition to read.

Though many struggled with relating to the themes in the book, the conversation easily drifted into revelations about their own identity. The students might have otherwise been open with classmates, but they were likewise open with the moderators who were previously unknown to them. Discussions about the book created the opportunity to discuss personal identity struggles, something that might not have otherwise been broached.

The book discussions also brought to mind expectations, both from college and from parents. For those arguing the necessity of reading the book regardless of desire, their conclusion was because it was expected of them as college students. Determination to do well in the class won over any dislike of the book. Students also began discussing expectations of parents, several having different expectations in high school surpassed by their first generation status in college.

In assessing the themes that emerged, student self-efficacy was demonstrated in all three areas of self-determination theory: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Goldman & Brann, 2016). Despite claims of laziness or not being interested in reading, the participating students were unapologetic yet acknowledged and owned the choices they had made demonstrating autonomy. Even without reading the book, however, those non-participating readers were active participants in the discussion and had a number of things to say about the identity themes of the book. Amongst the readers, there was a confidence in confiding in the group some very personal struggles. It is clear the students were competent in thinking critically about the literary devices in the book as well as drawing parallels and relevance from the book to their personal lives. A connection with others in the group was a necessary precursor to self-disclosure of personal identity struggles related to themselves and relationships with family and friends.

Also part of the class, the students were asked to write their personal narratives as a final assignment. Students wrote about three personal experiences in their first semester of college. These were also analyzed to further support the findings from the focus groups and to assess self-efficacy. Several important indicators of self-efficacy arose.

An important finding was the relatedness aspect of self-efficacy. Almost all of the participating students wrote about the groups they had joined, making them feel like they belonged on campus. Making connections and making friends provided the stability and interest they needed to feel like they had made a good choice for college. This was key because many disclosed that this university had not been their top choice, and for some, it was a fall-back plan. Fitting in helped them take responsibility for the choices they had made.

Although there were some who had planned on this university all along, many had to think about whether they had made the best choice. The authors cannot show a direct correlation between the activities of the class and self-efficacy, but the students were able to end the semester feeling very positive about the university. Feeling positive about their major, choice to live in the residence halls, friends, and programs of which they are a part helped the participating students feel they had made a competent choice.

Starting to feel comfortable with their academic programs and professors also aided in their sense of self-efficacy. One student was taking football more seriously, another was working through roommate issues, and a third discovered communication with professors was necessary for success. Opening up to classmates and creating semester narratives appeared to have a positive impact on the students in the class.

CONCLUSION

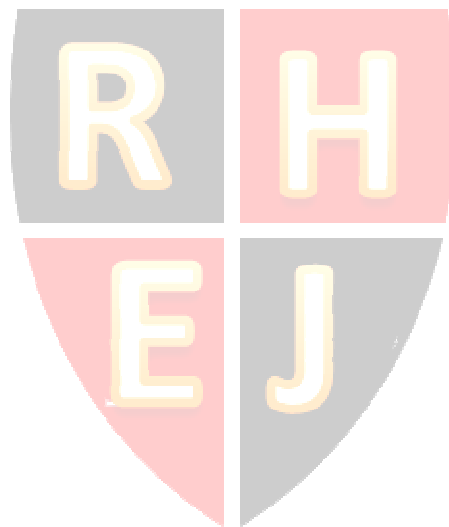
College is an uncertain time for young students, so providing them with tools to succeed is paramount to student retention. Stories can help students work through issues, build relationships, and help them critically think through the choices they've made. The following is some suggested pedagogical strategies based on the findings of this study.

- Create opportunities for students to participate in discussions prompted by the common reader in settings outside of the regular classroom, led by someone other than the instructor. Such conversations allow students to express their opinions in a grade-free environment.
- Provide detailed instructions about the research project associated with the common reader that allow students to take ownership of the activity while still meeting the learning rubric criteria. Encourage their creativity. In this case study, students created a

research poster that included a photograph of one of their group members assuming the identity of one of the common reader's major characters.

- Provide opportunities at the end of the semester for students to share their semester stories. These narratives should focus on the significant influences that played a part in their first semester at college. This reflective exercise often helps students identify what has led to their success and desire to continue or their desire to leave the university.
- Together with other university administrators track retention rates of students who participate in such learning experiences.

One student commented about the first year seminar in her semester story: "If I were able to choose, I wouldn't have chosen this class because I'm not one of those people who like group work. . . . Through the course I've learned many things including how to communicate and split up group work with other students. I've learned how to communicate better. [This class] "helped me learn about myself." Such learning experiences have the possibility of translating into greater retention of first year students by helping them develop competence, relatedness, and autonomy.



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