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# SLOGAN-LIKE SUMMARY ACTIVITY: SYNTHESIZING AND COMMUNICATING COURSE CONCEPTS

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## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

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Educators ask their students to learn about a variety of complex concepts within a given class period, during a semester, or across their entire program of study. Some students may consider the synthesis of complex concepts challenging, and this can be compounded when students are prompted to share the meaning of concepts with external stakeholders, such as peer groups, professors, or other scholars. However, these skills are important for long-term learning and should be incorporated into students' education (e.g., Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001).

The slogan-like summary activity proposed herein asks students to synthesize course content while simultaneously strengthening their communication skills. Processing style affects a student's learning outcomes ( Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Unlike shallow forms of information processing associated with visual or sound, semantic processing happens when learners construct, challenge, or manipulate multiple meanings between new information and their pre-existing knowledge. Semantic processing requires extensive elaboration rehearsal and reflection, which leads to increased information recall (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011).

Slogan-like summaries are a form of semantic processing where students identify and develop short, creative messages about topics they perceive to be the most important or compelling part of a class or class session. Slogan writing as a learning activity requires students to construct, challenge, or manipulate multiple meanings between new information and their pre-existing knowledge (Barkley & Major, 2002). Furthermore, students must consider ways to communicate those connections to external audiences. However, to create compelling slogans, students move beyond personal application to audience-centered messaging that focuses on the knowledge and sensibilities of potential external audiences (Gaudet, 2014). By identifying, constructing, or manipulating meanings for multiple audiences and contexts, students develop layered understandings of the meaning of a concept and how it might be applied. These nuanced understandings of meanings associated with course concepts are the product of semantic processing strategies and should increase information retention and recall.

Finally, this activity provides space for humor within the classroom. Compelling slogans often employ wit, rhymes, reveals, layered meanings, word-play (McKay, 2002) and word economization (Caprino, 2014). Once a student has identified a way to make a course concept meaningful to an audience or within a context, students must make careful choices about language and imagery to share that meaning. The

cognitive processes involved in crafting written and visual communication reflect semantic processing strategies and are associated with positive learning outcomes (Banas et al., 2011; Garner, 2012). Additionally, slogans and discussions about slogans are often witty or humorous. Research has found that witty and humorous communication in the classroom can enhance students' attention, improve the classroom environment, lower students' test anxieties (Garner, 2012), and increase student recall (Banas et al., 2011). To be effective, humorous and witty communication must be relevant to the course concepts, as well as attuned to audiences' knowledge and experiences. The creation and discussion of slogans gives students the opportunity to enjoy learning about the polysemic nature of course content and vocabulary in contexts that matter most to them.

## **OBJECTIVES**

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Through the formation of slogan-like summaries, students will strengthen their ability to synthesize and recall information, as well as clearly communicate course concepts to various audiences and in different contexts.

## **TOOLBOX: SLOGAN-LIKE SUMMARY ACTIVITY**

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Instructors should introduce the slogan-like summary activity at the beginning of their class. Tell students that at the end of a class session, they will be asked to create a slogan-like summary on a topic covered in the class session that they find important or compelling. Show students a few bumper-stickers or advertising slogans on any topic to help conceptualize the type of message you would like them to produce. During the class session, students should take notes and engage in the class as they normally would. They should pay special attention to key points and continually consider how they might summarize in a few "catchy" words what they believe is the most salient topic.

After a class lecture or discussion session has concluded, instructors should explain the slogan-summary activities and expectations in more detail. It is important to talk about the desired communication goal for the slogan-like summaries. It is also helpful to provide examples based on familiar course topics learned earlier in the semester. We list several instructions to consider sharing (pers. obs.). In each case, the instructor can select or allow students to self-select a communication goal.

- Slogan-summaries should be about a specific concept or set of concepts discussed during a class session.
- Slogan-summaries should be relevant to the student as well as at least one other audience, so the meaning can be grasped by persons of all backgrounds.
- Slogan-summaries should have a goal(s) of informing, persuading, commemorating, and/or entertaining audiences.
- Slogan-summaries should be creative and compelling. Try to create a memorable phrase, utilize creative word-play, or another form of language use (or all of the above).

- Slogan-summaries can mimic the style of bumper-sticker phrases, advertising slogans (Barkley, Major, 2018), summary puns (i.e., the clever use of wording to demonstrate wit, artful articulations, alliteration, or other forms of creative, concise writing), or phrases that summarize and galvanize (i.e., phrases that attract attention, which may include indirect or direct action messages), all of which can be summarized as "interactive techniques" (University of Central Florida, 2018).

It is important that students have time to think about the targeted concept. Give students at least 10 minutes to identify, reflect on, and learn more about a course concept. Students will need approximately five minutes to create their slogan. Alternatively, this activity can be assigned to pairs or groups of students, or it could be assigned as a multi-day or week-long activity.

A debriefing discussion following the slogan-summary activity can further help students reflect and develop more nuanced understandings of the course concepts. Presenting and defending messages in a supportive environment helps students develop a sense of psychological ownership of the course concept (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001), which is positively associated with information retention and a sense of self-efficacy (Blau & Caspi, 2009; Buchem, 2012; Hamer, 2000; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002). Additionally, a debriefing discussion gives students the opportunity to consider other students' messages and thinking processes. In doing so, students develop even more nuanced understandings of how a concept can be applied or understood.

Instructors have multiple options for debriefing activities and evaluation. If time and class size permits, instructors can ask students to share their slogan-like summaries at the end of a class session. Alternatively, an instructor can collect the slogan-like summaries at the end of class and present several at the start of the next class to remind students of course concepts. If utilizing a peer-to-peer platform (e.g., Packback.co), a learning management system discussion board (e.g., Blackboard or Canvas), or social media thread (e.g., Quora or Reddit), there is an opportunity to prompt students to provide feedback and advance discussions on topics acknowledged in peer slogans. In all cases, let the author of the message discuss their creative process to foster a sense of ownership and to model semantic processing for other students. Evaluation of class discussion, presentation, and outside of class assignments related to the slogans should focus on student creativity, understanding of the target concept, the appropriateness of the targeted concept's application.

To reinforce and add depth to learning, this activity can also be expanded into a lengthier writing assignment. After creating and discussing slogan-like summaries in class, students can write a short essay justifying or expanding upon their slogan by explaining its meaning(s) with citations, explication, and media references (e.g., Ted Talks, which add context and content to associate with the students' slogans). Evaluation of slogan-like summaries and assignments related to this activity will depend on each instructor's teaching style, but assignments may be considered complete vs. incomplete. Alternatively, slogans may be assigned numerical or letter grades based on creativity and understanding of the concept.

## **DISCUSSION:**

Slogan-like summaries are creative ways to synthesize and learn how to share course content. This activity has the potential to increase student learning and classroom enjoyment by providing student ownership of concepts (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001; pers. obs.). Student feedback has been overwhelmingly

positive in informal conversations and formal teaching evaluations (pers. obs.). Based on instructor-solicited survey data, students self-reported that the activity led to increased attentiveness and learning (unpubl. data).

Slogan-like summaries can provide students a way to engage in critical discussion about the meaning(s) and practical applications of the course concepts. Discussions involving this exercise could focus on why the message would be well-suited for a targeted context or audience. Students may suggest alternative slogans based on a different context or audience. By examining the application of a concept and having critical discussions about its application, students can deepen their understanding of the concept.

Slogan-like summaries could be used in courses hosting interdisciplinary audiences. Based on our experience, this activity encourages increased discussion and engagement from interdisciplinary audiences. Disciplinary backgrounds shape how students interpret concepts and share meanings in their slogans. These differences create worthwhile points of discussions regarding the nuances of a concept's meaning or multiple meanings.

Slogan-like summaries are also appropriate for students enrolled in multidisciplinary or science-based courses. For example, students enrolled in physical and life science programs may have less writing experience and, as such, may experience more reticence to engage in communication-oriented activities. However, written communication skills are needed across various disciplines (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008; Kavanagh, Drennan, 2008; Sageev & Romanowski, 2001). The Graduate Management Admission Council's *Corporate Recruiters Survey Report* (2017) suggested that communication skills are rated among the top-three skills desired by employers upon graduation. Based on our experience, students coming from science, social science, and humanities programs enjoy the brevity and familiarity of a slogan message. It makes the writing activity feel less intimidating than larger writing activities, such as reflection essays or blog posts. Even though this activity requires few words, to write compelling slogans, students must use the critical and creative thinking processes that foster increased learning and communication skills. The activity can also be structured in a way that students either improve presentation skills through class discussion or improve writing skills through follow-up essays and assignments. Instructors of courses that are not associated with communication skills can use slogan-like summaries to aid information synthesis while also preparing their students to succeed in professional settings.

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