Learning Episode and Reflective Narrative (LEARN)

From Face-to-Face to Hybrid, and Back Again:
Rebooting a Required Course to Support Self-Reflective Learning

I. Situation: An Uninspired Class Inspires Change

Before assuming my new role as a Clinical Professor and the Director of Undergraduate Teaching in the Department of English (beginning Fall 2019), I taught in the Kelley School of Business in the Communication Program (CPCS). There, the vast majority of my teaching focused on "regular" (i.e. face-to-face) sections of "Strategic Business Writing" (BUS-C204). But beginning in the Fall of 2016, I agreed – due to the over-enrollment and classroom inventory challenges we continually faced – to develop a "hybrid" version of the course, which I would teach as one overload section each Fall semester. In contrast to regular sections of C204, hybrid sections meet only once per week in the traditional classroom, with the other half of the coursework carried out through online components.

Over the summer between my Fall '17 and Fall '18 hybrid courses, three things aligned and inspired me to substantially redesign not only my hybrid course but also my regular course. First, I was dissatisfied with my hybrid format. I felt increasingly sure my hybrid students weren't getting as rich an educational experience as my regular students. In those first two semesters, as I struggled to get my head around what "hybrid" means and can do, I had made the rookie mistake of trying to translate – in a one-to-one fashion – my regular course design into a hybrid/online format. This translation, I thought, would ensure consistency between the two. Instead, it merely created an anemic version of the original. While my hybrid students *were* learning and *were* meeting both the course learning objectives and Kelley's SLOs, I realized I wasn't seeing in them the same level of rigor, ownership, skill-based confidence, and ability to use the language of the course (regarding, say, revision strategies and priorities, or fluency in document design, etc.) that I was accustomed to seeing in my regular C204 students.

Second, because of this dissatisfaction and already at work revising the hybrid course for its next launch, I enrolled in the summer 2018 Course Development Institute (CDI) that CITL specifically offers for faculty developing online/hybrid courses. In this intensive, week-long institute, the facilitators took the "backward course design" at the heart of all CDIs and integrated it with sustained attention to the digital tools and resources IU offers and the best practices for using those tools to promote learning inside and outside the classroom.

Third and finally, because I have become increasingly invested in both the science of learning and the importance of self-reflective or "self-regulated" learning, that same summer I organized and led a reading group of department colleagues interested in this area of scholarship.[1]

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[1] Together, we read Peter Brown's *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (2014), James M. Lang's *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (2016), and Linda Nilson's *Creating Self-Regulated Learners* (2013). On my own, I also read Susan Abrose's *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (2010) and Linda Nilson's *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* (2014).

Initially, I viewed these two summer professional development opportunities as separate: the reading group was an expression of my general pedagogical interests while the CDI was aimed specifically at redesigning my hybrid course. All of this learning, however, coalesced to drive an overhaul of *both* course designs. Taken together, this intellectual work helped me more consciously – and with more scholarly acumen – articulate the principles that had *already* been *intuitively* driving my pedagogy. I had always, I realized, been designing my courses (C204 and others) **to make learning self-reflective, transferrable***,* and, therefore, **durable** for the long term. The activities I had designed and the assignments I had created all involved teaching students to become aware of the *processes* by which they acquired and refined their communication and critical-thinking skills.

This intuitive focus on process through activity and repeated application served my previous students and supported their learning, as attested by their writing assessments, course evals, and unsolicited correspondence (usually prompted by a communication success in their internships or jobs). But I realized that, while these students had been getting an educational experience that fostered self-reflective learning, *they didn't know it* (not as such, anyway). In other words, while the course made them aware of their processes (i.e. what they were learning and how they could apply and refine that learning for the rest of their lives), it didn't make them aware that *the course* was guiding them in doing this work, that the rigors of the quizzes, projects, and activities were all purposefully designed and integrated to aid their growth as writers and thinkers. Becoming aware of this purposeful integration, I thought, would help them see that the course wasn't so much "demanding" as it was "rigorous," that the assessment or "grading" of their work wasn't so much "strict" as employing "high standards" focused on development, and that the time required by the course wasn't just "intensive" but an "investment" in their own empowerment. Ultimately, I wanted to more fully and clearly make visible to students in future semesters that the course was connecting together learning how to *write* and learning how to *learn* – because neither can be as effective and empowering on their own as they can be together.

II. Action: Revising the Course Infrastructure

Over that summer, I redesigned the "infrastructure" underlying the course, in both its regular and hybrid format. While the actual assignments, activities, and sequence of the work didn't change much, what did change was making visible to the students the sequencing, which invited them not just to participate in the course but to take ownership of it at a pedagogical level as they understand the why's and how's of what we were doing and its application beyond the classroom. With a more self-reflective infrastructure in place, I made subtle but important changes to the hybrid format, using more Canvas tools (and using them more thoughtfully) to support online learning engagement.

I am convinced the redesign achieved this student ownership and unlocked an additional level of consciousness and learning. Comparing the course evals from my Fall '17 and Fall '18 hybrid sections, the 2018 students found the course demonstrably more effective. On the questions most directly correlated to *course design and transparency* – for instance, question #1 pertaining to learning goals, questions #2 and #3 to structuring in- and out-of-class work, and questions #12 and #14 to making the subject meaningful through course materials – my 2018 students rated the course higher (and, in some cases, significantly higher) than my 2017 students.
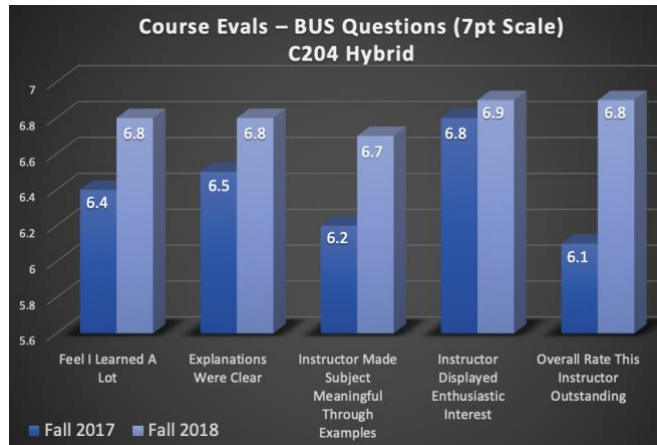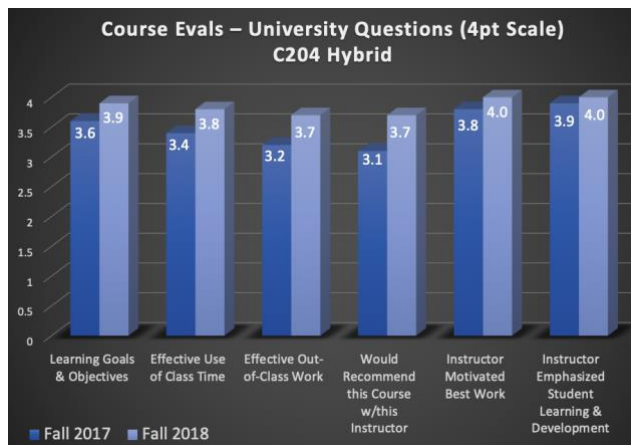
This trend held true across my regular sections as well:
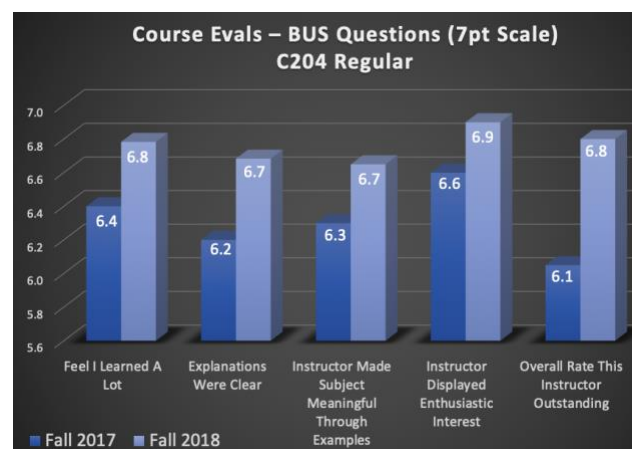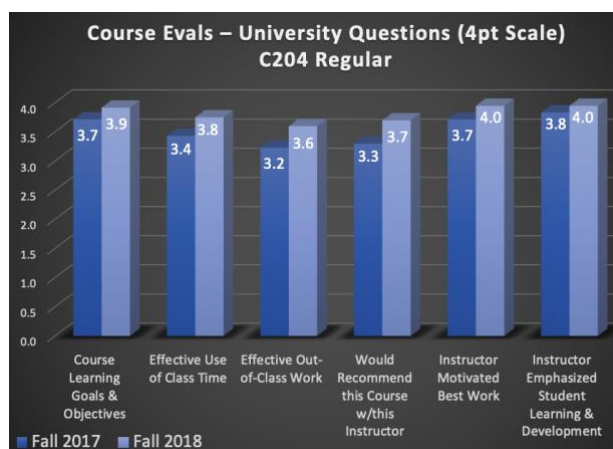
So, what specifically changed from one Fall to the next? The answer is not much and *everything*.

As a pre-requisite Kelley course taught by 20+ faculty across 130+ sections annually, C204 – by necessity – must remain recognizably consistent, including learning objectives/outcomes, major assignments, and point distribution. Moreover, as a long-time educator specializing in writing instruction, I have worked diligently over the years to build my C204 curriculum around evidence-driven best practices. I believe in the value and rigor of our core assignments and in the instructional and assessment apparatus I've built around them, including weekly quizzes testing cumulative content, formative assignments leading up to summative assignments, hands-on collaborative classroom activities, and a rigorous load of reading, drafting, peer editing, and discussion. Keeping this core content of the design intact, I made three specific changes overhauling the course delivery and inviting students to see more clearly the process-oriented, self-reflective scaffolding that carefully develops their learning and writing over sixteen weeks.

Three Specific Changes:

1. Repackaged the **course infrastructure**, creating more transparency of learning objectives and skill progression from top to bottom throughout the course
2. Broke the required **Individual Case Analysis** (ICA) assignment into two sequential parts
3. Converted the Final Exam into a **Revision Portfolio** emphasizing reflection

Change #1 - Repackaged Course Infrastructure

The most pervasive revision I made was to "repackage" the course in a way that emphasizes: (1) self-reflective learning, and (2) transparency in the course design, allowing students to fully and explicitly see how all parts of the course work and build upon one another.

Graphic Syllabus:

One impactful way I created this transparency was to offer students a "graphic syllabus" that complimented our regular syllabus. Using the same weekly format as our regular syllabus, the graphic syllabus showed students the "building blocks" of skills they were learning, how those blocks stacked on top of one another (as well as expanded each week), and how each assignment – both formative and summative – assessed those specific skill sets.
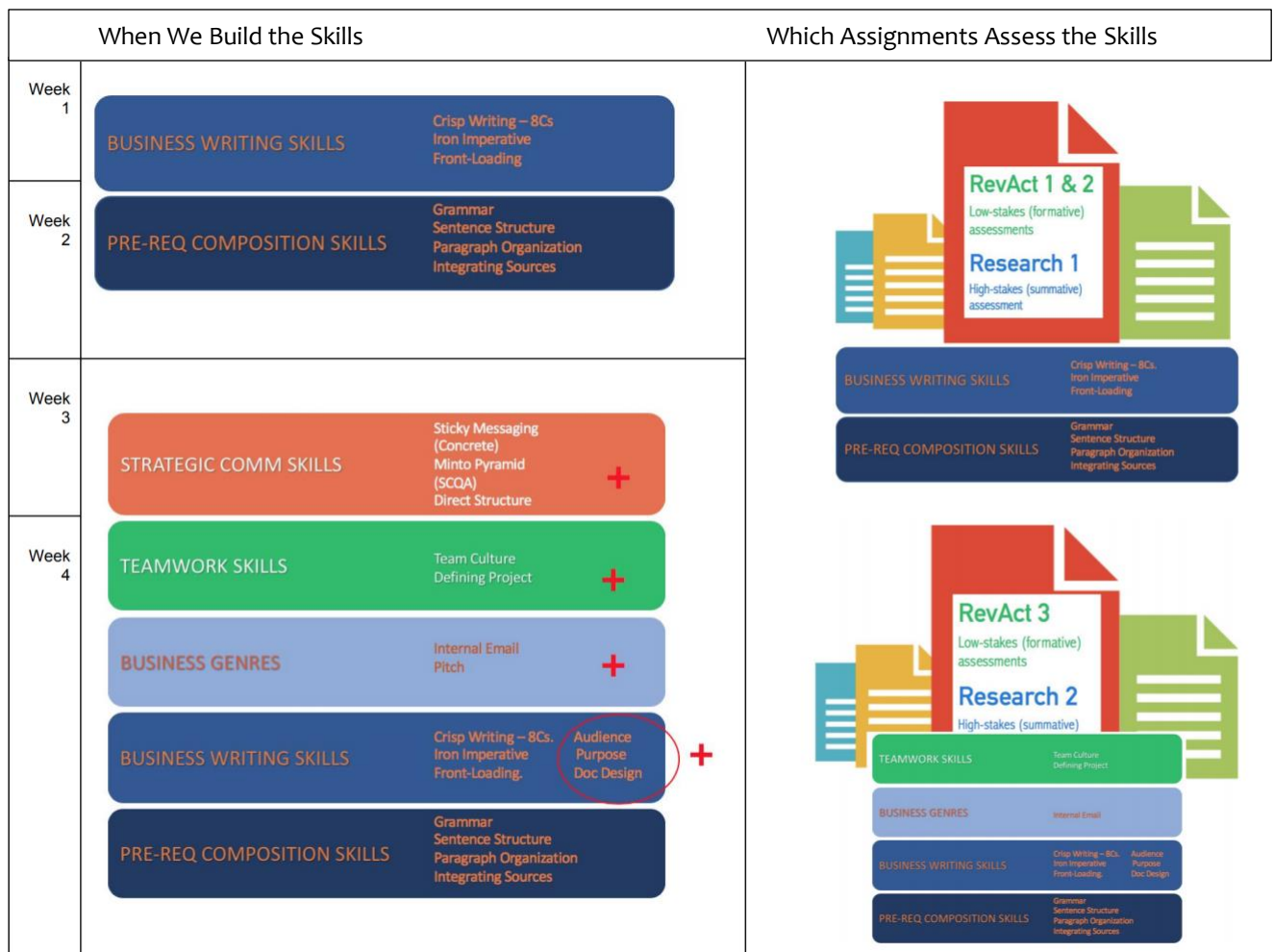
In addition to graphically featuring this skill progression in the syllabus and analyzing it together during the first week of class, I returned to it repeatedly, using it to frame our objectives for the week or the upcoming assignment. I also inserted snapshots of it into assignment sheets and Canvas portals, so students could explicitly see how the smaller assignments and activities we were doing weekly had built toward these larger, higher-stakes assignments. For example:
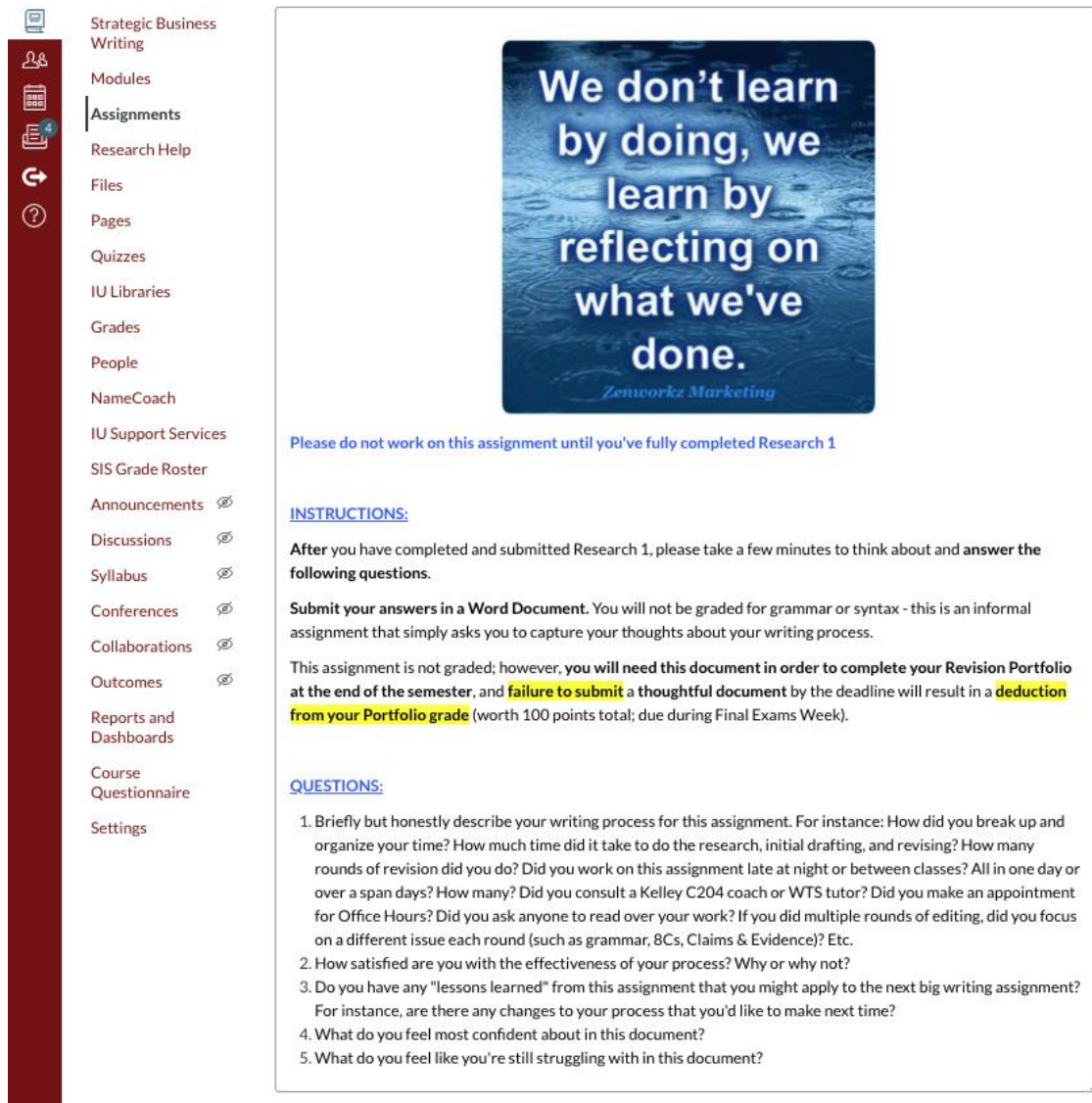
I noticed over the semester that students adopted the language of this skill progression while meeting with me during office hours, routinely articulating their questions in terms of specific skills and framing questions about assignments in terms of learning objectives. In other words, rather than vaguely asking "how can I do better on assignment X," students were asking, "can we look at my document design and audience awareness in assignment X?" Such consistent *focus on the skills* alleviated anxieties about writing as "subjective" by demystifying the process and the criteria for success.

Self-Regulated Readings:

I made the language of "self-regulated learning" central to my course; and I framed this theme in term of its *value to the students* – the way that becoming self-regulated learners would allow them to adapt, survive, and thrive in the professional world after graduation. I showed them studies linking job acquisition and promotion to being self-motivated, agile learners. I also wove a few very "readable" articles about self-regulated learning into the course, particularly focusing on the science behind why quizzing – when done correctly – creates sustainable (rather than temporary) knowledge and the need to continually practice skills in new and different contexts to refine and ensure long-term execution.

Self-Regulated Practices:

I incorporated several small practices that the scholarship I'd read promoted for helping students become meta-cognitive about both what they're learning and how to apply it. One such practice: students submitted brief, *informal reflections* after each of their major assignments outlining the key steps they took in their process, lessons learned for next time, and areas of pride and struggle. We used these reflective documents as the jumping-off point for office hour discussions and class workshops. Also, students used these reflections at the end of the semester in assembling their Revision Portfolio (more about this later).

As another example, I added *reflective surveys* after select in-class workshops. Following these very active, hands-on activities (involving moving around the room, engaging with teammates, collaboratively revising inside Google Docs, using large sticky notes stuck to the walls), I sent students surveys via Google Forms asking about specific insights gained that day and plans for future application.

As another example, I introduced a "Course Matrix" assignment that asked students to fill out a table at the beginning of the semester articulating specific things they *already knew* in relation to each of our C204 learning objectives and then, again at the end of the semester, articulating what *more* they knew and could articulate now.

Change #2 - Reformatted Individual Case Analysis (ICA)

In addition to this pervasive level of revision that I have been describing, I also made two specific revisions to the assignment sequence that aided transparency and student success. First, I split the large "Individual Case Analysis" (ICA) assignment, which every C204 instructor must assign but has flexibility in designing, into two equal parts. The first part, now called "Research 1," assessed students' ability to complete introductory-level research and write effective, front-load paragraphs synthesizing that research. The second part, now called "Research 2," assessed students' ability to identify specific veins of research, become "experts" in their chosen area, write an action-oriented report, and deliver that report as an attachment to a crisp, professional interoffice email. Together, these two assignments accounted for the same point total as the original ICA and assessed the same writing and analytical skills; but, by more carefully scaffolding the skill development, students created higher-quality documents (see chart below) and approached their learning and skill execution with more confidence and insight.

Change #3 - Converted Final Exam to Revision Portfolio

Following the scholarship in self-regulated learning, I exchanged the Final Exam, which assessed terminology and featured two writing prompts, for a Revision Portfolio requiring students to choose 3 assignments they had taken through multiple drafts that semester, articulate their revision process and results, provide now *another* revision, and articulate why this final product evidenced higher-quality. They also framed the portfolio with a "Statement of Learning" articulating the specific skills they learned and how the reader would see evidence of that learning in the portfolio's documents.

III. Results: Student Perception and Quality Changed

Ultimately, neither the workload nor the rigor of grading/assessment changed significantly from 2017 to 2018; but the quality of work demonstrably improved on the two revised assignments:

Major Assignments (i.e summative assessments)		FALL 2017 Class Average	FALL 2018 Class Average
Midterm Exam	same in 2017 and 2018	88 %	89 %
Individual Case Analysis	from 1 assignment in 2017 to 2 assignments in 2018	76 %	81 %[*]
Final Exam →Revision Portfolio	from an exam in 2017 to a portfolio demonstrating revision in 2018	86 %	90 %
EY Capstone Case Report	same in 2017 and 2018	88 %	90 %

[*] The grades from Part 1 and Part 2 are averaged together

What's more, the students' perception of their work and learning also improved dramatically, as evidenced by the evaluation scores cited earlier and – perhaps more importantly – by the way they wrote about their learning in response to the qualitative question on the evaluations. For example:

Hybrid Section:

BUS Open Ended Questions

What did you like most about this course and instructor?

Comments
This class might have been the most important class that I have taken thus far in my undergraduate career. I was able to accomplish so much, including sharpening my grammar foundations, writing concisely, and creating effective documents. Professor Yaggi really believes in her methods and sets high expectations for her students. Yet despite the extremely high expectations, the class was conducted in a way that drove us students to do our best – to really learn what she put forth in front of us, and to genuinely care about the material. Her passion for the class is obvious, and that translated well to the students. The content was reinforced by concrete examples and learning really happened in and out of the classroom.
Dr. Yaggi comes very well prepared for class always. Her enthusiasm is beyond the roof which really really really helps motivate student to learn and it just makes class so much more interesting. Everything about the course was communicated very clearly. The set up of multiple drafts were an amazing option to set us up for the final report. Every time we have office hours, I always leave with new information and things I can improve on with our team.
I feel like I learned so much from this course by Professor Yaggi providing us with assignments and tasks that gave me the knowledge that I will need to work in the real world. She always came to class very enthusiastic and positive and that was something that motivated me to work even harder.
I really like that I was challenged in this course. I have never been the best at writing, and needed a course like this to challenge me and actually make me a better writer. I also liked the amount of resources we had throughout the semester. The examples that Dr. Yaggi provided made creating the report so much easier and we were able to understand the expectations. Also, the deadlines along the way really helped my group end up with a great finished final report that I don't believe would have been possible had we not had the amount of feedback we received. Dr. Yaggi is so motivating and truly wants her students to learn from her class and it really inspired me to push through and challenge myself.

Regular Section:

BUS Open Ended Questions

What did you like most about this course and instructor?

Comments
she was always motivating us to do our best work. She was easy to talk to and made the learning environment fun and comfortable. She cared about us genuinely learning and was a great professor
I really liked how passionate she was. The course was challenging in a good way.
Professor Yaggi has been extremely helpful and supportive this semester. My team experienced some problems at the beginning and I have also had some personal issues this semester. This class was one of the only ones that I looked forward to because I knew she understood and would do whatever she could to help me and my team. She has easily been the best professor I've had at Kelley and my skills have improved so much. She made the class fun when I wasn't sure it would be.
I liked most about this course is that Professor Yaggi was always enthusiastic during class and always encouraged us to do our best work. She was always available to answer questions and help us with whatever we needed. Truly my favorite professor by far.
Dr. Yaggi was extremely invested in the growth of her students and made me a much better writer. This course has prepared me for Icore and beyond.

What began as a quest to improve my hybrid course became an all-encompassing pursuit. While, yes, I succeeded in better using digital tools to support my hybrid students, the deeper infrastructural changes to both courses created a richer learning environment for *all* my students, and for me, too.