

## **Designing, Developing and Assessing Online Intra-collegiate Earth Charter Projects: Focus on Diversity**

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**Keywords:** Earth Charter; diversity; undergraduate research; project-based learning; education; team projects; online collaboration.

**Abstract:** This article describes a collaborative online project that focused on the Earth Charter, particularly on its principles related to diversity. The project was conducted in two online courses of three sections in two colleges at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU): the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Education. One section of twenty-three students in a Composition II course and fifty-four students in two sections of an Introduction to Diversity for Educators course collaborated in mixed teams on a four-stage problem solving project that exposed the participants to a larger community of learners and reinforced shared responsibility for the present and future welfare of the human family and the global community.

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The project focused on Principles 1- 3 and 8 -16 of the Earth Charter related to diversity and culminated in each of twenty-two teams completing an undergraduate research paper, an activity to implement the research, and a research poster for presentation on Research Day held on April 20, 2012 at FGCU.

Surveys were administered to the students during the first week of the course before the project began and as the project ended to determine their awareness and knowledge of one to two principles of the Earth Charter related to diversity. Ninety-five percent of the thirty-three students who completed the post survey strongly agreed or agreed that they were able to discuss one to two principles of the Earth Charter related to diversity. With these encouraging results, the authors plan to offer online collaborative Earth Charter Diversity projects to their first year composition students and their students who are considering entering the field of education.

## **Introduction**

The Center for Environmental and Sustainability in Education is a fledgling FGCU organization beginning to address the Earth Charter Initiative in the last three years. One of The Center's curriculum initiatives is an interdisciplinary studies class held each academic year called "Living the Earth Charter." This class examines ways that students can apply the Earth Charter principles both personally and communally (Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education).

Other higher education institutions have a longer history of offering Earth Charter-related courses. For example, the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh (UWO) has sponsored Earth Charter Community Summits since 2001 to raise awareness of the Earth Charter and sustainability issues. These yearly free summits are open to everyone, including the Oshkosh community. UWO is one of only eight colleges and universities that as entire institutions (rather than departments or centers) endorse the Earth Charter. In fact, it is the only institution of higher learning in Wisconsin that endorses the Earth Charter (Office of Sustainability).

Succar and Sandoval (2012) use the Earth Charter at the University of Guanajuato to raise awareness among their students of the importance of its principles. Their case study involved students pursuing bachelor's degrees in a variety of disciplines who participated in a training program to become Youth Promoters of the Earth Charter at the university. The students were three Environmental Engineering majors. Over two years, from 2005 to 2007, twenty-seven workshops were facilitated by these Youth Promoters with close to three thousand faculty, staff, and students participating. The authors concluded with a recommendation to evaluate the effectiveness of these workshops in promoting more awareness of the Earth Charter Initiative.

Stephanie Johnson (2006) summarizes other success stories of the implementation of the Earth Charter at institutions of higher learning. She briefly describes twenty case studies of the practical application of the Earth Charter. For example, at Michigan State University, professors have developed a sustainability course that focuses on self-expression, personal reflection and active engagement rather than passive learning of theory.

Mwaura (2007) investigated education faculty and student teachers' awareness of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to promote sustainable development. The study involved eighty-one students and thirteen faculty members in an undergraduate teacher education course at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. The study concluded that student teachers had some ESD knowledge and that education faculty were not fully involved in community engagement as it related to educating others for sustainable development.

Another example of an institution that has brought awareness of the Earth Charter to its students is The University for Peace (UPEACE) in Costa Rica. This United Nations affiliated university uses the Earth Charter as an educational tool. All of UPEACE's students are introduced to the Earth Charter during the course of their studies and feedback from students who attended the summer, 2011 offering of "Educating for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" noted that they found value in curriculum building centered on the Earth Charter (Educating for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century).

## **Collaboration - Project Earth Charter: Diversity**

### *Goal and learning outcomes*

This co-curricular project addressed FGCU's Goal 2: Culturally Diverse Perspective. The goal states that a student should

"Know and understand the diversity of the local and global communities, including cultural, social, political and economic differences. Analyze, evaluate, and assess the impact of differences in ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, native language, sexual orientation and intellectual/disciplinary approaches. Participate in collaborative projects requiring productive interaction with culturally-diverse people, ideas and values" (Florida Gulf Coast University Academic Catalog).

The specific outcomes involving knowledge, understanding, analysis, evaluation, and collaboration provide the basis by which the university and the learner, sharing responsibility, can measure progress toward reaching Goal 2 and the other eight goals outlined in the 2011-2012 Academic Catalog.

This project was also aligned to the Earth Charter Initiative's mission "to promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace" (The Earth Charter).

### *Funding*

The authors received a mini grant from The Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education at FGCU to design, develop, implement and assess this project.

### Project grading & components

**Project Earth Charter: Diversity** began in Week 7 of the Composition II and the Introduction to Diversity for Educators courses. The project represented 25% of each student's final grade in all three classes, or 250 points. The students in each of the three sections had other assignments associated with the content of each of the two courses. These assignments were housed in their course in Angel, the learning management system (LMS) at FGCU. **Project Earth Charter: Diversity** was set up as a separate merged course in the LMS so that the instructors had access to one roster and one set of folders related to the project. The assignments are listed in Table 1.

| #            | Stages                           | Assignments   | Due Date                  | Possible Points |
|--------------|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 1            | Planning                         | Poster Registration/Participation in Team Discussion Forum                                  | by 11:55 p.m. on 03.04.12 | 25              |
| 2            | Research                         | Annotated Bibliography  | by 11:55 p.m. on 03.19.12 | 25              |
|              |                                  | Statement of Problem and Literature Review  | by 11:55 p.m. on 03.26.12 |                 |
| 3            | Product (Project Implementation) | Survey or Interview Questions   | by 11:55 p.m. on 04.02.12 | 25              |
|              |                                  | Methodology Section of Research Paper   | by 11:55 p.m. on 04.02.12 |                 |
|              |                                  | Project Implementation Activity   | by 11:55 p.m. on 04.09.12 | 50              |
|              |                                  |   |                           |                 |
| 4            | Poster                           | Final Research Paper (including Abstract, Findings, Conclusions & Recommendations sections) | by 11:55 p.m. on 04.12.12 | 50              |
|              |                                  | Poster Template   | by 11:55 p.m. on 04.16.12 | 25              |
|              |                                  | Poster Presentation   | on 04.20.12               | 25              |
| Total Points |                                  |   |                           | 250             |

Table 1: Project Earth Charter: Diversity Stage Assignments

### Planning Stage: Week 7

The Planning Stage began in Week 7 of the two courses, or approximately midway through the semester. Prior to the beginning of the project, the students in each of the courses completed readings and assignments related to diversity but had not yet been introduced to the Earth Charter (Read the Earth Charter). During the Planning Stage, students watched a 10-minute film providing them with an overview of the Earth Charter Initiative (EC International). The objectives and history of the Earth Charter were explained along with examples of actions and activities inspired by the Earth Charter. Students were then provided with an overview of the entire team project, which included group role descriptors - Project Leader, Research Coordinator, Product Coordinator, Poster Coordinator (Bolduc-Simpson and Simpson, 2012), the Earth Charter document (Read the Earth Charter), and thirty diversity project descriptions classified under nine general topics and linked to twelve Principles of the Earth Charter related to diversity (e.g., Hate Symbols, The Power of Language, Humane Education, Songs and Social Injustice, Immigrant Groups in Southwest Florida, Teaching Styles vs Learning Styles, The Establishment Clause & Religion, Religious Bias in Textbooks, Gender Bias in the Classroom, Understanding the LGBT Community at FGCU, Aegism & Elder Abuse in Southwest Florida, Students with Learning Disabilities, Homelessness in Lee County, Veterans of Southwest Florida).

Team members were assigned by the instructors grouping first year Composition II students with first to third year students in the two sections of Introduction to Diversity for Educators. Twenty-two teams of four students were initially formed.

A Team Discussion Forum was set up for students to communicate and share documents among their team members at any time during the project. The students also used other communication methods that ranged from the Live Chat feature in the LMS to Facebook, texting, and face-to-face meetings.

An additional discussion forum titled *Ask SBS & Dr. S* was created so that students could post questions about **Project Earth Charter: Diversity** at any of the stages in the project.

Besides familiarizing themselves with the project materials and attending to other course-related assignments, the teams were required to choose a project topic and complete the online poster registration process for Research Day with the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at FGCU. All team members were also required to introduce themselves in the Team Discussion Forum.

#### *Research Stage: Weeks 8, 9, 10, & 11*

During this 4-week period, the team, led by the Research Coordinator, conducted research on their topic, completed an annotated bibliography assignment, and began working on the Statement of the Problem & Literature Review sections of the research paper. A research paper template was provided (Elements of a Research Paper), along with sample sections of a research paper drafted by the instructors and related to the topic of Earth Charter Awareness at FGCU. Additional materials were provided to the students in the form of YouTube videos on how to write an annotated bibliography (How to Write an Annotated Bibliography Tutorial) and conduct research (Gomesify, 2010). The purpose of this stage was to gradually introduce students to the research process and writing a research paper. Students collaborated on the paper using Google Docs posting their Docs links in their Team Discussion Forums.

#### *Product Stage: Weeks 12 & 13*

The Product Stage, or implementation stage of the project, was designed to give students the opportunity to design a survey or draft a set of interview questions to the target audience of their study. This stage included four assignments: the survey/interview questions; the methodology section of the research paper; the findings section of the research paper; and, the actual project implementation, which was an activity that was tied to the project and attempted to solve the problem that the team had identified. Once again, in order to facilitate the process, the instructors provided a list of fifteen activity ideas related to the Earth Charter topics (e.g., a website, a recorded presentation, a magazine, a brochure, a video, a TV ad, a cartoon book, an interview, a slideshow, a blog, a information-dissemination table on campus, a poster) and suggested methods to carry out the activities and appropriate tools to use with the methods. For example, Activity 1 involved creating a flash mob event. The method was to text, Facebook, or tweet

fifteen people who would meet on the FGCU Library Greens at a certain time in early April and do a dance/song/poem that would bring awareness of the four pillars and principles of the Earth Charter. The tool that could be used might be a camera to videotape the event and make a YouTube video that would later be shared with at least 400 students at FGCU.

In Week 12 of the course, the survey/interview questions were required. In Week 13, the activity was to be completed along with the findings section of the research paper. In addition to a sample survey and a document outlining the guidelines for conducting research interview questions (McNamara), students could watch two short YouTube videos on how to use a survey tool – surveymonkey (AndyAmyonBiz, 2011) and a five-minute video that provided tips for conducting a good interview (Couric, 2009).

### *Poster Stage: Weeks 13 & 14*

The final stage of the project began in Week 13 of the course and consisted of three assignments: completing the research paper inclusive of an abstract; work on the research poster template; and, the poster presentation to faculty, students, the local community, and judges on Research Day (April 20, 2012) at FGCU.

This stage was once again structured for success and included readings and materials on writing research paper abstracts (Purdue OWL: Report Abstracts), the poster template, specific directions for completing it, and information for all Research Day participants that was issued from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

## **Assessment - Project Earth Charter: Diversity**

### *Pre-course survey*

A pre-course survey in each of the sections of Composition II and Introduction to Diversity for Educators was administered during the first week of the course. One item sought student familiarity with the Earth Charter, particularly as it related to the concepts of diversity: “I can discuss one or more areas of the Earth Charter that are related to diversity.” Sixty-six (66) students responded to the item, of which 79% either strongly disagreed, disagreed, or were neutral in their responses (Figure 1).

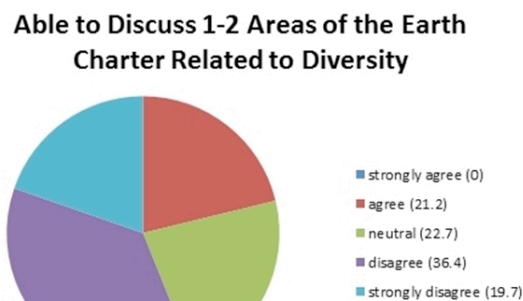


Figure 1: Pre-Course Survey – Item 1

*Post-course survey*

Thirty-nine (39) students completed the post-project survey. As shown in Figure 2, almost 95% of the students reported that they were able to discuss 1-2 areas of the Earth Charter related to diversity.

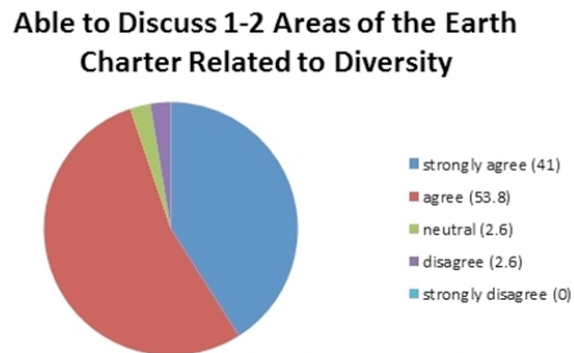


Figure 2: Post-Project Survey – Item 1

*Research Day at Florida Gulf Coast University*



Research Day 2012

On April 20, 2012, twenty-one teams of 2-4 members presented their undergraduate research posters on their Earth Charter diversity topics to the FGCU academic and local community. Project topics ranged from studies on homelessness and poverty in Lee County to the indigenous peoples of Southwest Florida (Project Earth Charter – Diversity – Research Day – April 20, 2012).

At the conclusion of the whole-day event, one of the twenty-one teams won the College of Education Undergraduate Research Award for their work on the indigenous peoples of southwest Florida. Figure 3 captures Team 11's winning poster.






## Indigenous Peoples of Southwest Florida

Ryan Greer, Alexis Lucin, Kristin Matyas, Nicole Merriam  
Including the Calusa, Seminole and Miccosukee Indian Tribes

Two Online Sections of ENC 1102 Composition II, College of Arts & Sciences AND one online section of EDF 2085 Intro to Diversity for Educators, College of Education  
Instructors: Sheila Bolduc-Simpson (SBS) and Dr. Mark Simpson (Dr. S)





### INTRODUCTION

The indigenous peoples of Southwest Florida (SWFL) have been around for many years prior to the urbanization and development of the area. The term "indigenous" refers to the native people of the land, some of which arrived in SWFL as early as the 16th century. The predominant groups of the area are the Calusa, Seminole, and Miccosukee tribes. The interests and cultures of these tribes are easily and often ignored, especially among younger generations. This year, Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) -partnered with the Earth Charter- set out to pursue a mission. Together, they intend to make changes such as: transitioning to sustainable ways of living, promoting ecological integrity, encouraging universal human rights, and developing a culture of peace. In order to succeed in any of these, the students of FGCU must first familiarize themselves with the history and the concerns of the people native to the area in which they now live. These indigenous peoples of Southwest Florida have seen more change- both positive and negative- throughout the years than current immigrants to the area may ever realize. The purpose of this research is to either prove or eradicate the beliefs of our Project Earth Charter team- beliefs that FGCU students do not know much about the issues of importance to the indigenous tribes of SWFL. We believe that the more inhabitants of this area know about the natives, the more informed they will be on issues that might one day affect them. The urbanization and lack of respect for the natives has resulted in conflict and our society must understand we have to live in agreement in order to maintain a synchronized society that continues to pursue the Earth Charter's mission.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Hundreds of years ago, many indigenous tribes inhabited Southwest Florida. As time passed, foreigners from northern lands began to migrate south (especially during the civil war). As these non-native people began their southern trek, the natives were killed by disease, war and even brutal murders. As news spread about the new settlers throughout the tribes of Natives, many decided that it would be in their best interest to flee. As the Natives from northern Florida began to migrate to southern Florida the tribes began to clash, causing even more Native American deaths. As time passed and more and more white settlers began to appear, the Natives headed to the last places that were safe. These locations in our time are known as the ten thousand islands and all of the land to the south of Alligator alley. Now even though these tribes are not as prevalent as they were many years ago, they are still to be found but just not as easy to locate. The living arrangements and environment are also not as they were when the people were comfortable and what they thrived in. The major issue we are dealing with today is that many people have no idea or background information on these very important indigenous people and their contribution to the history of the state in which we live in. Many students are probably not very well aware of these tribes because they either could care less to research them or take the time to uproot the history, or they do not have the access to the accurate information to do so. This issue all relates back to the Earth Charter and sustainability and maintaining

### ABSTRACT

This research focused on principles of diversity within the Southwest Florida (SWFL) area. Through the use of a survey, the study examined the familiarity of Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) students with indigenous peoples of the SWFL area, including the Calusa, Miccosukee and Seminole tribes. Of the seventy three students whose survey data was analyzed, approximately 54% had no familiarity with the indigenous peoples of SWFL. However, approximately 49% of those surveyed believed that SWFL residents should be knowledgeable about the area's indigenous tribes, their histories and current issues. These results indicate that although students are not yet familiar with the tribes, they understand that there must be some importance and value to the natives' history. One way to accomplish spreading the knowledge of the area's indigenous peoples was to create a website on their cultures and histories for educational purposes. Such a website proved to be an effective tool for educating the student population. 100% of students who viewed the website and completed a short survey on the information they learned claimed that they learned either "some" or "a lot" about the tribes. 90% of those students also claimed that after reading the histories and current issues of the Calusa, Seminole and Miccosukee tribes, they felt that it was very important to be familiar with these people.

### METHODS

- The researchers' survey starts out by first introducing why the study is being conducted. Their main focus is to first understand the knowledge of fellow FGCU students about the indigenous people of Southwest Florida.
- To do so, a survey was created using the Survey Monkey software and was then emailed out to over 400 students. The survey consisted of 8 questions.
- The first three questions asked how familiar students were with the indigenous people of Southwest Florida, how important they felt the indigenous people were, and if they had specifically heard of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum or the Museum of the Everglades in Southern Florida.
- The last four questions attempted to uncover the demographic information about the students (what year they are in college and what classes they are enrolled in) and what they believed to be effective methods of maintaining sustainability and cultural diversity.

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### FINDINGS

Throughout the research process, our team created a survey to gather an idea of FGCU student's knowledge about the Indigenous Tribes of Southwest Florida. The survey was created using Survey Monkey and was then sent out to 400 students in the College of Arts and Sciences. We received 73 responses to our survey, an amount large enough to allow us to make decisions. Twelve different majors were represented in the responses and three responses were from undeclared majors. It is a definite problem that Southwest Florida residents are not familiar with- sometimes not aware at all of the history of the environment in which they live and the people they share it with.

#### Students Familiarity with the History of Indigenous People of Southwest Florida

Very Familiar   Somewhat Familiar   Not Familiar At All



| Familiarity Level   | Percentage |
|---------------------|------------|
| Very Familiar       | 55%        |
| Somewhat Familiar   | 39%        |
| Not Familiar At All | 6%         |

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results reveal that our team of researchers was correct regarding our belief that FGCU students are not well informed of the indigenous peoples of SWFL. Over half of the students interviewed did not demonstrate any knowledge at all of the Miccosukee, Seminole, and Calusa tribes. Fortunately, results also indicate that about half the students surveyed believe it is important to be knowledgeable of the native tribes of the SWFL area. In an effort to educate FGCU students, our team created an educational website (<http://indigenouspeopleofswfl.weebly.com/>) with information about the three native tribes. The link was sent out to FGCU students. In order to test the effectiveness of our website, a two question survey was posted on the homepage for viewers to take after reading the web site's content and "Questions To Test Your Understanding" were added at the end of each tribe's section. This website proved to be a huge help to educating the FGCU population on the indigenous peoples of SWFL. The website had many viewers, 20 of which took the brief survey on the home page. Of this set of 20 results, 100% of respondents said they learned "some" or "a lot" of information after viewing the web site. In addition, 90% of respondents believe that it is important for FGCU students to know about the tribes.

In order to help educate FGCU students about the Indigenous Peoples of SWFL on a larger scale, the university could possibly integrate the histories and other aspects of the native peoples lives into a class or part of other classes' curriculums. The website created throughout this research project proved to be helpful as well, so possibly students and professors could spread the word. By circulating the link provided, students can learn the basic backgrounds and histories of these tribes. This might spark an interest in them to learn even more!

Figure 3: Indigenous Peoples of Southwest Florida – Team 11

Team 11 also developed a website which summarized their research on students and the three major tribes in southwest Florida: Calusa, Seminole and Miccosukee reflecting much of the content included in their research paper.

### Assessment of the project

Students completed a ten-question survey on their experience of collaboratively working across campus and online on the Earth Charter diversity project. The purpose of the survey was to obtain data to improve and further develop future collaborative merged-course initiatives that incorporate Earth Charter principles as they relate to diversity. Sixty-four students responded to the survey.

In general, the students favorably responded to the online project and felt that it was a positive experience (Table 2).

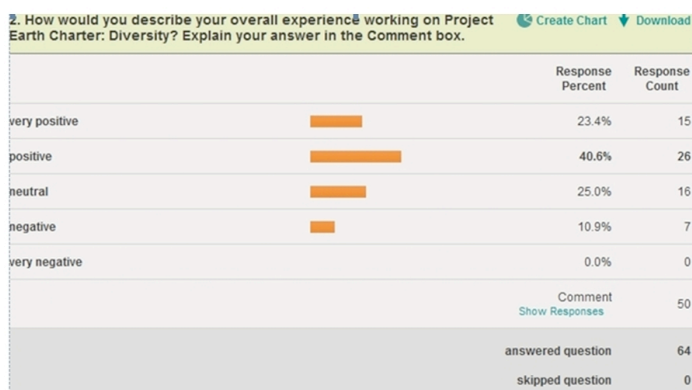


Table 2: Post-Project Survey - Item 2

A representative sampling of comments students wrote are included in the Appendix.

### *Strategies for designing rich and meaningful online co-curricular team projects*

Designing team projects can be challenging in a face-to-face course. Add to the mix a team project involving three different sections of two online courses in different colleges in a university and the tasks become complex. Ensuring that effective team collaboration and meaningful learning occur demand time and commitment on the part of all concerned. The authors suggest five strategies for designing a rich and meaningful collaborative online learning project using effective communication tools. The strategies include:

1. prompt and frequent instructor-student communication;
2. student use of a variety of communication and collaboration tools (Google Docs, Facebook, discussion forums, online chat rooms, survey tools, texting, etc.);
3. instructor modeling;
4. a structured research process including the development of a research paper, an activity, and a presentation (poster, academic paper); and,
5. a project management methodology in which team-member roles and responsibilities are clearly explained.

### *Future directions*

Based on the success of the project, the instructors are planning revisions to their Spring 2013 merged courses incorporating student feedback and reworking assignments to reduce student workload. Overall, the project was effective in developing in composition students and potential future educators not only an awareness of the Earth Charter but also a shared responsibility that we all should strive to be informed global citizens who work together toward building and preserving a sustainable global society.

## Appendix

### Project Earth Charter: Diversity - Student Comments in Post-Project Survey

How would you describe your overall experience working on Project Earth Charter: Diversity?

- *I had never heard of this project before this class and I'm glad I have the knowledge about it now. This is something I may want to include in my future lesson plans. I had a great experience at Research Day as well, before this project I did not know what Research Day was all about and I'm glad I got to be involved in it, it made me feel like I was part of something and all the hard work stood for something. It was definitely very interesting to do the research on this topic and figure out things, it was just hard to do a group project for an online course.*
- *Pushed me to go beyond the class and actually meet with professors to learn their unique views as faculty here at FGCU.*
- *Project Earth Charter was a very good experience overall. The project went very smooth!*
- *It was an interesting project. It took up way too much time and students have work and other class work to do. I think this project should be optional or only have the students that are in an actual classroom do the project. Putting two totally different classes together to me was a huge problem.*
- *I had a good experience working with Project Earth Charter. The main thing that I felt could have been improved was how often our team communicated.*

How would you rate the overall value of the Project as it relates to the academic work you are expected to do at this university?

- *I learned how to do research, and create a formal presentation.*
- *We chose a topic that I feel that I could relate to. So I believe that was helpful in all the work that was done. Robin and I both looked at ourselves and that was helpful to relate to everything.*
- *It is valuable because we have to be able to do research throughout our educational career and this is a good starting point.*
- *The value of this project really showed how important it is to work as a team, which I will always be doing as a teacher in the future as well as in other classes.*
- *I think it is valuable because you actually learn what goes into writing a research paper, it covers all the steps.*

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