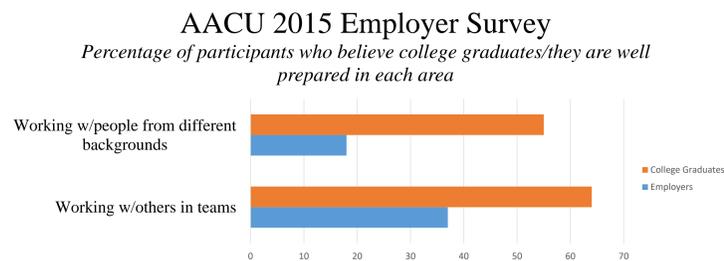




Research Problem: Declining Social Cognition

Recent empirical research has indicated the decreasing social cognition of many college students:

- Meta-analysis of college students' scores from 1979-2009 on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), students' empathetic abilities have declined by 40% (Konrath 2011).
- Meta-analysis of college student data over roughly the same time period shows an approximately a 30% increase in narcissism (Twenge 2008).
- Data from employer surveys (see example below) also indicates that college graduates struggle with social cognition in practice.



Social Cognition and Literature

Daniel Goleman (2006) divides social intelligence into two components:

- social awareness—of which social cognition as the cornerstone—which involves *understanding* others, relationships, and social situations.
- social facility—which involves *applying* social awareness.

Recent research on social cognition and literature:

- Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley (2009) have validated the link between empathy and reading literature.
- David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction improves one's ability to understand others' mental states.

Methodology

Participants were enrolled in English 1330: Introduction to Literature.

Instruments (beginning and end of the semester):

- Perspective-taking questions from the IRI (Davis 1983),
- Open-ended questions about why literature courses are part of general education (Q1);
- What they hoped to gain/thought they gained from the course (Q2);
- Description of their approach to a recent interpersonal conflict (Q3).

Assessment:

- IRI scores were reported on a Likert scale from 0-4; possible responses range from 0-28.
- Responses to Q1 and Q3 were assessed to see if they used language related to social cognition.
- Responses to Q3 were assessed to see if the description of the participant's conflict involved perspective-taking.

Research Questions

Can students improve their social intelligence in a general education literature course? Does a pedagogy that includes activities and practices related to social cognition affect how students understand literature courses as part of their core curriculum?

Quantitative Results

- 17 students completed all assessments and gave informed consent.
- Due to this small sample size, one extreme outlier was taken out of the IRI averages.

Avg. Beg. IRI Score	Avg. End IRI Score	Change
19.3125	20.5	+1.1875

- As the above shows, the average IRI score increased from the beginning to the end of the semester.
- These results were not statistically significant after running a repeated measures t-test.
- When individually matching results, 9 students increased their IRI score, 3 showed no change, and 5 decreased their score.

Qualitative Results

The word cloud below maps out students' responses at the end of the semester when asked why they think literature classes are part of the general education curriculum. Repeated words are shown in a larger font.



Discussion

- As the word cloud (*above*) illustrates, the percentage of participants using language related to social cognition to literature courses increased significantly from the beginning to the end of the semester.

Survey Question	Beginning of the Semester	End of the Semester
Q1	47.06%	68.75%
Q2	17.65%	43.75%

Discussion

- The response of Student 304 (below) demonstrates a clear link between social cognition and literature courses at the end of the semester.

Q1 (Beg.): To make a more well-rounded student
Q1 (End): To broaden the spectrum of understanding
Q2 (Beg.): Knowledge. This is a last minute filler class for me, but it seems interesting so far, so I will try to gain anything it has to offer.
Q2 (End): A wider understanding of multiple perspectives.
Q2 (Beg.): Knowledge. This is a last minute filler class for me, but it seems interesting so far, so I will try to gain anything it has to offer.
Q2 (End): A wider understanding of multiple perspectives.

- Based on their description of how they approach a recent conflict (Q3), participants showed an increased ability to *apply* social cognition from the beginning to the end of the semester.

Beginning of the Semester	End of the Semester
23.53%	43.75%

- The last sentence of Student 322's above response to Q3 demonstrates thinking from the other person's point of view.

Q3 (End): Within the last month, I had a conflict with my roommate. We were in our dorm room, and he wanted to watch TV. I wanted to study, and we argued over who should have to leave. I thought my roommate was being unfair. I wanted to get work done, but he wanted to engage in something that would disrupt that. I eventually left and found somewhere else to study. I think it was the best solution because it was easier for me to take my work elsewhere.

Directions for Future Research

- Expanding study to include sophomore-level courses and courses that focus on race, gender, and international education.
- Developing an assessment tool to measure emotional granularity.

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