



# Can a Class be Too HIP? Classroom Dynamics and Learning Communities



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## ABSTRACT

This project explores issues related to what the AAC&U deems High-Impact Practices (HIP) in higher education. Quest I courses are the initial element of the general education program at the researchers' institution. They are built upon two HIPs: First-Year Seminars and Experiences (FYE) and Learning Communities (LC). They incorporate FYE in significant ways and create LCs by pairing a disciplinary course with a speaking or writing course. Student evaluations have indicated a mismatch between professor observations of learning and students' apparent satisfaction. The project asks, What is the relationship between student/professor rapport (including attitudes towards learning about difficult issues like racism) and learning? Do LCs produce a "class comparison penalty"? If so, does this negatively impact durable learning about key concepts and competencies? Analysis of surveys of students from several waves will add to the literature that critically examines HIPs.

## BACKGROUND

Quest I courses are the initial and critical element of the University Studies Program (USP), the five-year old general education curriculum at UWO. The aim of USP is to replace the previous general education mentality of "check a box from a huge menu of courses" with a cohesive and coherent curriculum that gets students off to a good start, emphasizes the importance of liberal education, and produces more well-rounded scholars and citizens. Quest I classes incorporate FYE elements in significant ways and put first-semester students in LCs (co-enrolling in two or more courses). This is accomplished through pairing the disciplinary Quest I course (which is also tied to a broader "Signature Question") with a required speaking or writing course. Teaching such a course (introductory sociology focused on cultural competence) for five consecutive years has been enlightening, fun, and frustrating.

Students seem to commonly evaluate the disciplinary courses quite harshly, which discourages investment in Quest I classes since student evaluations continue to be given weight despite research demonstrating that they are poor predictors of learning (Uttl, White, and Gonzales 2017). We hypothesize that apparent student dissatisfaction is partly due to them having very different experiences in the paired speaking or writing course, creating a "comparison penalty", in addition to the low evaluations that tend to result from teaching white privilege to white students (Boatright-Horowitz and Soeung 2009). Course assessments suggest that students generally reach key learning objectives, such as those related to cultural competence, despite this friction; this is consistent with arguments that "racism is a concept that students must truly 'get' in order to move forward to higher levels of learning in the field, but also that this knowledge can be 'threatening,' 'troublesome' and transformative" (Winkler 2017:16), particularly to students that take the course to fulfill a requirement. We wonder how such experiences impact student learning about such topics.

The ten HIPs identified by Kuh (2008) "have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds" (p. 1). Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella (2015) argue, however, that "although these practices are proposed to promote academic and personal development among undergraduate students, little empirical research has been conducted to test this conjecture" (p. 511). Their study revealed that FYE and LCs did not directly predict liberal arts educational outcomes. Other research about LCs in particular has demonstrated their positive impact on various elements of learning, including intercultural effectiveness, but there have been relatively few critical analyses. We hope to add to the literature about these HIPs by interrogating the assumptions that underlie claims as to their effectiveness and attempting to identify unintended consequences and room for improvement.

## METHODS

To explore these issues we developed a 37-question, confidential survey instrument delivered online through Qualtrics after being approved by the IRB at UWO.

It served as a pre- and post-test instrument to assess the classroom climate, FYE goals, and learning outcomes for students enrolled in the Introductory Sociology and Race, Ethnicity, and Society Quest I courses at UWO in the fall 2017 semester. Enrollment in these courses is capped at 25 students to facilitate the two primary HIPs discussed here. The vast majority of the students (45) took both the pre- and post-surveys and were given points in the course for doing so (they could opt out of the study and write a reflection instead).

The survey was also delivered to students who took the course in four previous years with the first author (n=51). Table 1 presents some of the sample characteristics.

	Female	Male	White	Asian	Black	Latino
	78.7%	21.3%	85.2%	4.9%	4.2%	3.5%

The survey asked students to evaluate FYE elements related to their transition to college and the impact of the LC. It also explored students' competence in discussing race and their comparison of the paired classes, and utilized several published scales to measuring belonging, a portion of the CoBRAS (Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale, Neville et al. 2001), and student-instructor rapport.

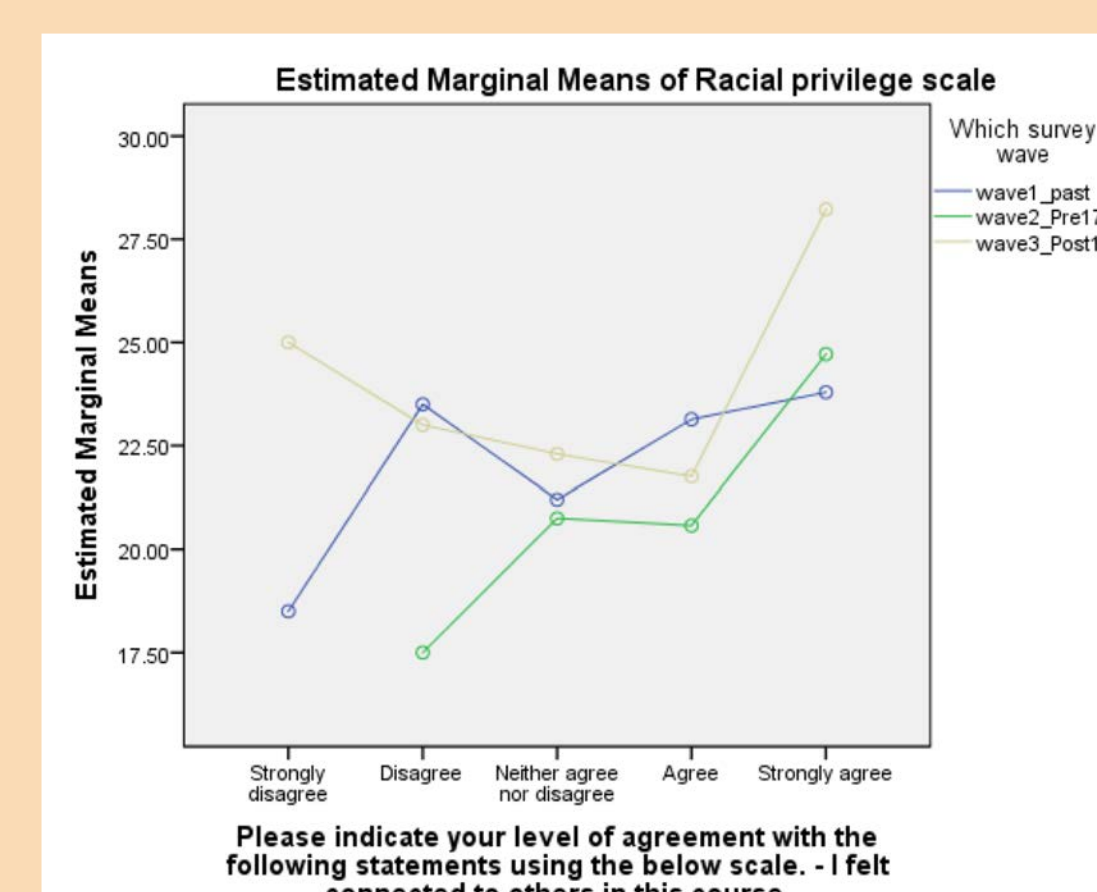
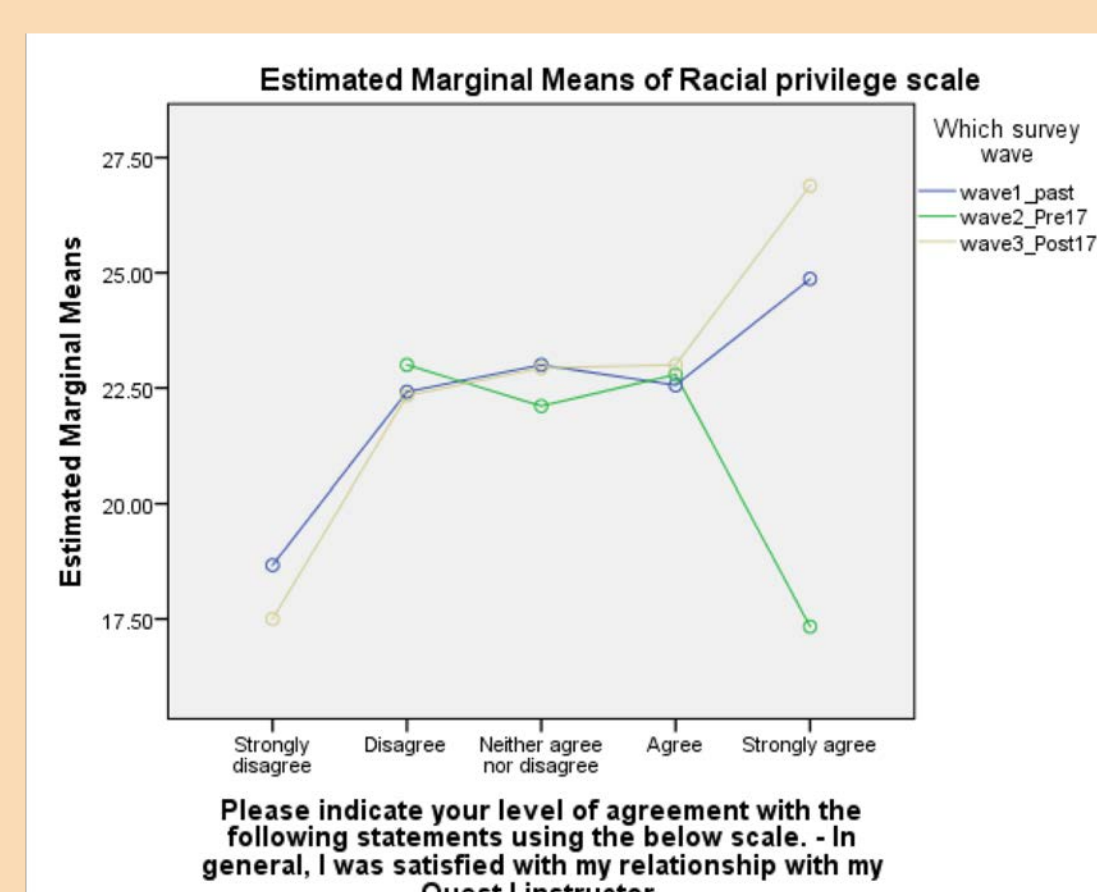
Preliminary coding and analysis using has been completed.

## RESULTS

- The current students achieved statistically significant (p value = .009) gains in their awareness of racial privilege, the most relevant composite measure from the CoBRAS scale (see Table 2). The other composite measured moved in the desired direction, but not at a statistically significant level.
- Their gains in this regard also correlated with rapport with instructor sense of connectedness with peers, as indicated in the plots below.

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Pair 1 Racial privilege scale	20.95	41	4.59	.72
Racial privilege scale Post	23.66	41	4.40	.68
Pair 2 Blatant racial issue unaware	12.63	42	2.74	.42
Blatant racial issue scale Post	12.07	42	2.85	.44

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Racial privilege scale - Racial privilege scale Post	-2.70732	6.35312	.99219	-4.71261 - .70202	-2.729	40	.009
Pair 2 Blatant racial issue unaware - Blatant racial issue scale Post	.54762	3.97678	.61363	-.69163 1.78687	.892	41	.377



## RESULTS, cont'd

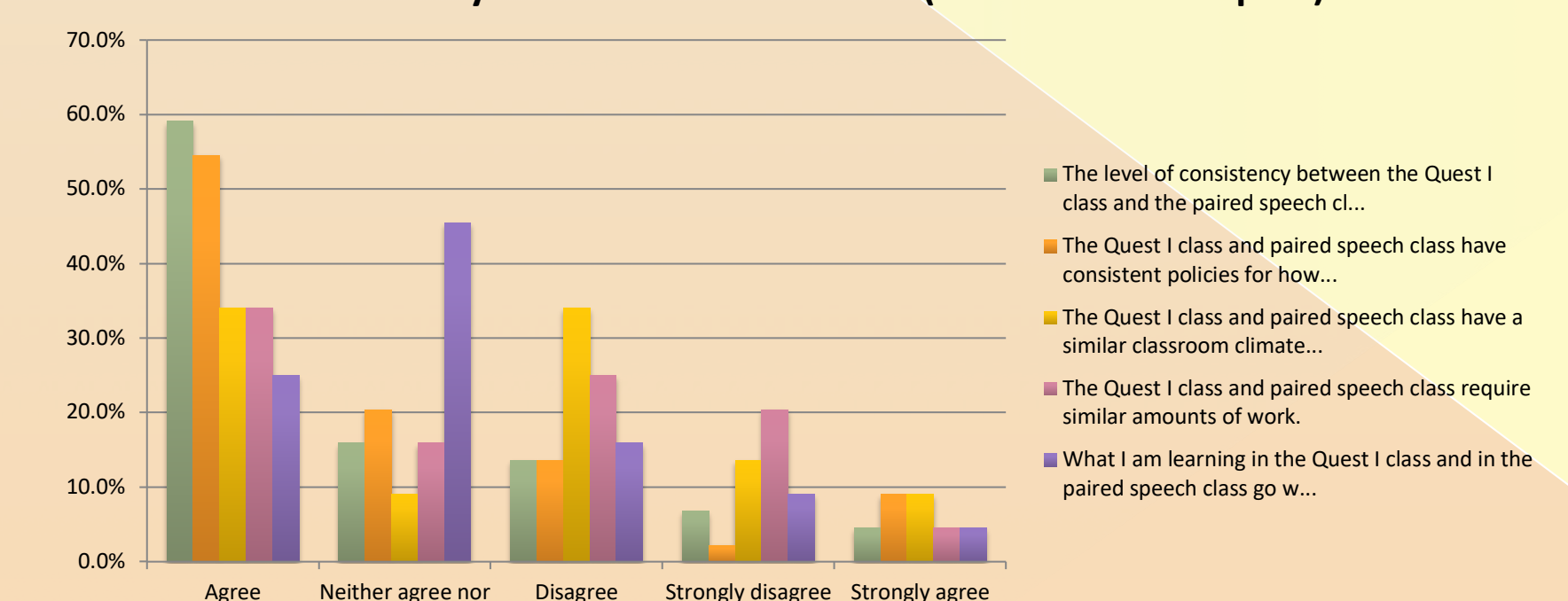
- The students' self-assessment of their overall learning in the sociology course was generally solid, as half of the current students in the post-test and 59.2% of the past students indicated they had learned a great deal or a lot in the class. Two past students noted,
  - "I absolutely loved this class, it's been one of my favorite classes I've taken at UWO so far. I loved learning about new perspectives and ways of looking at life and other people. I wasn't able to think in those ways before taking this class."
  - "I learned a lot about diversity, which was and still is very beneficial to me!"
- Current respondents evaluated both the student-instructor rapport and teaching effectiveness of the instructors teaching the skills (speech, in this case) class as significantly more positive compared to the instructors teaching the paired disciplinary (sociology, in this case) course (see Table 3).
  - This may simply reflect teaching excellence on the part of the speech instructors. For example, one respondent commented in this regard, "Best speech teacher ever!"

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Err
Pair 1 Aggregated for Quest instructor	41.63	83	7.37	.81
Aggregated for paired instructor	49.83	83	4.85	.53

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Aggregated for Quest instructor - Aggregated for paired instructor	-8.20482	8.97117	.98471	-10.16373 -6.24591	-8.332	82	.000

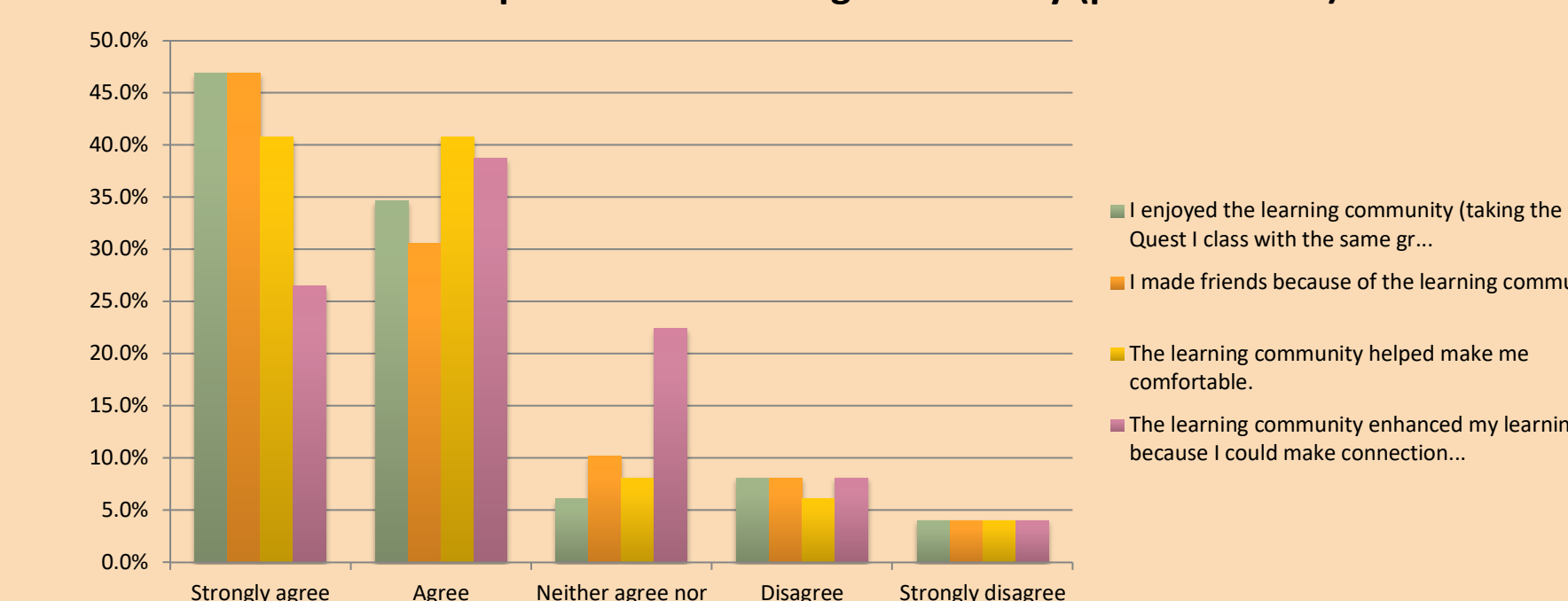
- Direct comparison of the two classes indicates that students generally saw the policies to be similar but the expectations for the course and climate in the classroom to be different.
- For example: "In the speech class, it is more of a laid back environment and in the Quest 1 class it is way more serious with 2x has much homework."

Consistency Between Paired Classes (current students post)



- Evaluations of FYE and LC by students were generally positive. One noted,
  - "IT was nice to have small class sizes/ 2 classes paired, really got to know people my first year."

Impact of the Learning Community (past students)



## CONCLUSIONS

Our preliminary analysis provides support for the hypothesis that instructors teaching disciplinary content to an LC that is co-enrolled in a skills-oriented course such as speech may suffer from a comparison penalty in their students' evaluations of their teaching effectiveness. Based on the literature, this may be particularly true for instructors teaching about challenging topics such as white privilege. This study may reveal some unintended consequences of these particular HIPs, as they involve only first-semester students in LCs, forming a relatively tight-knit group as they go directly from the Quest class to speech, understandably comparing them.

Students may nonetheless be able to achieve important learning outcomes, including in thorny areas related to cultural competence. This supports the argument that student evaluations are not good predictors of learning.

Further, preliminary analysis suggests that student learning about topics like privilege is correlated with feelings of connectedness to peers due to the FYE and LC elements.

Further research will need to be conducted to determine how durable learning—that which is retained over time—is affected by the classroom dynamics explored in this project.

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