

Evaluation Summary:

VITAL at the School of Social Work

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http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/evaluations/vital_ssw_summary.pdf

Project Description: Background & Purpose

In Fall 2003, CCNMTL, Professor Tazuko Shibusawa, and Professor Susan Oppenheim of the School of Social Work began planning the incorporation of Video Interactions for Teaching and Learning (VITAL) into the Advanced Clinical Practice with Couples course for the Spring 2004 semester. In the course, students used VITAL to examine professionally produced examples of clinical interventions with couples. Students then used these videos to investigate concepts and theories covered in the course, and place themselves as virtual therapists devising potential interventions.

VITAL is a Web-based learning environment used by pre-professional students in several fields, including social work. The main features of the environment as used at the School of Social Work are:

- A digital video library featuring video clips of six expert practitioners working with six different couples in clinical settings. Video of a seventh couple is provided without a therapist to allow students to discuss their own approach to the scenario.
- A video viewing tool that allows users to clip, annotate, and save specific segments.
- A workspace in which users can write essays that incorporate video clips to support theories of and plans for clinical interventions. These multimedia essays are published in the VITAL environment, where the instructor and other students can read them.

Overview of the Evaluation Process

In the spring semester of 2004, CCNMTL conducted a quasi-experimental evaluation at the Columbia University School of Social Work in order to determine the effectiveness of VITAL's integrated learning environment for teaching clinical skills. This evaluation had three main objectives:

1. To determine whether VITAL provides students with enhanced learning opportunities for conceptual understanding and analytical skills for effective clinical intervention.
2. To determine whether digital video cases of clinical sessions, as used in the context of VITAL's online workspace, help students shape their own methods of clinical intervention in couples therapy.
3. To provide recommendations for the use of VITAL in clinical social work classes.

Professor Shibusawa taught all four sections of the Advanced Clinical Practice with Couples course, all of which used the new curriculum, including the VITAL Digital Library. All students were given the same assignments. But in order to establish a control group, only two of the sections had full access to the VITAL integrated learning environment to study and complete their assignments, allowing us to compare the learning process and performance of Treatment Group A [TGA] and Treatment Group B [TGB.]

Treatment Group A (TGA) Students:

- were able to view the videos in the digital library
- did not have access to the clipping and note-taking tools
- composed essays in a traditional manner, e.g., without the multimedia VITAL workspace.

Treatment Group B (TGB) Students:

- were able to view the videos in the digital library
- had full access to the VITAL digital workspace, including video viewing, clipping, and note-taking tools
- composed essays in the multimedia VITAL workspace, incorporating videos in their work.

Findings

The degree to which students are expected to use the VITAL environment influences how well they engage with the material.

- Students from both groups commented that assignments based on the digital video library increased their commitment to the course activities and their engagement with their own learning process.
- Students in TGB, with full access to VITAL, put greater effort into their assignments, because they knew other students would be reading their work.

Watching videos of therapists in clinical settings helped students apply their course readings to actual practice.

- Exercises requiring the use of the digital video library helped students in both groups understand the theoretical constructs presented in the course readings and lectures.
- Students in both groups gave far greater evidence of linking theory with practice when they were asked to relate specific course readings with the videos than when assignments did not directly cite specific readings.
- Students in TGA utilized course readings to support their written arguments to a greater extent than those in TGB, who were more likely to cite examples from video clips in their essays. TGA students structured their written arguments in a “(1) reading – (2) video illustration” form, whereas the TGB students structured their responses in a “(1) video example – (2) statement of theory” form. The TGA’s model more closely matched those of a familiar, academic essay.

Students using VITAL made a conscious effort to apply the skills they were learning about to their own clinical work.

- Students found the exercises requiring use of the digital video library to be a very good means of practicing clinical skills. They expressed a strong sense of having learned skills that would serve as a foundation for future work in clinical situations.
- Students were able to identify clinical techniques utilized by therapists in the video library that could be applied to other clinical settings.
- When asked to envision how they would intervene in clinical situations, students in TGB provided a larger number of potential interventions in their assignment responses than students in TGA. In addition, the potential interventions TGB’s students suggested depicted greater specificity about the interventions -- when, why, and how -- than those TGA’s students chose to submit.

The amount of access to the VITAL environment affected how students prepared their assignments.

- We found that students in both groups developed a common set of initial strategies in response to assignments, taking handwritten notes while viewing items in the digital video library. These notes did not correspond to the linear sequence of actions within the video excerpts.

- Students in TGB identified and excerpted specific video segments before writing their essays more often than their peers in TGA, who had more limited access. These excerpts serve as the basis of their final responses.

Recommendations

VITAL assignments can encourage students to link their reading assignments to the practical examples they are seeing.

- To explore student understanding of specific concepts and theories, assign students to compare, support, or refute certain concepts using examples from the video
- To encourage students to think about how their studies relate to their clinical judgments, in addition to assigning students to discuss how they would respond to a situation, ask students to include a theoretical reflection on how they arrived at their response.
- Provide students with writing samples that demonstrate the kind of writing you expect. VITAL papers can take the form of a new type of writing. Work with your students to find the suitable form of writing and method of citation that fits your learning objectives.

VITAL assignments can be successfully tailored to encourage students to consider specific ways in which they would engage clients in their own practice.

- Consider the purpose of each assignment when asking students to focus on different levels of specificity for their interventions, e.g., whether you wish students to focus on a whole video segment or specific moments.
- Include specific instructions to reflect on potential strategies or techniques to be transferred into other clinical settings.
- Include a section in which students compare their own styles to the different therapists' styles or hypothesize about what their styles would be.

Conclusion

This report is just a beginning. VITAL will continue to be used in clinical practice courses at the Columbia University School of Social Work. As more and more students use the application with different videos, content areas, and professors, we will have greater opportunities to learn more about its impact on student work and learning.