

PGEM – Professional Guided Email Monologues

A Feasibility Study



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Introduction

We know from experience that keeping a diary during research projects often can help the researcher to stay focused. In our setting the text of the diary was sent to a professional change agent (SE) and called **Professional Guided Email Monologues PGEM**. The Concept of **Professional Guided Email Monologues** was introduced the first time during E-Learn 2009 in Vancouver / BC (1). A feasibility study was performed with students at the University of Vienna, Austria. The University of Vienna is very large. Students in class often have not enough time with the professor. PGEMs were considered to be especially helpful for the student's motivation.

Hypotheses

- Writing Professionally Guided Email Monologues strengthens student's motivation as the student puts together a research project.
- Writing PGE Monologues on email to a professional reader is a more effective tool for self-reflection than are traditional diaries or journaling. (this jumps to a conclusion without mentioning the supposition that "people will write differently to a stranger than to their reading self")
- PGEM can augment or even replace a one-on-one assistance from the research-mentoring professor.
- PGEM is especially important in virtual classrooms to help students to stay with their project and to not lose momentum..

Methodology

AP (University of Vienna, Department of Communication) and SE (Institute of Integrated Communication, Toronto) designed a research application to use PGEMs in a virtual class room of students of communication of the University of Vienna (second year). The beginning was in Nov 2009, the end in May 2010. The PGEM - Method was introduced via Skype into the student's classroom. The student's could see the picture of SE projected on the wall and SE could see the students during her talk. In the Skype session on 23rd of Nov. 2009, SE instructed the students about writing "Monologues" on email while doing their research projects in class.

- Instructions:**
- Write whatever you have in mind, no matter how personal just like free association.
 - You can decide when to write Monologues and choose the frequency of writing.
 - You will get an acknowledgement of receipt of the Monologue without any specific feedback.
 - You can choose if you want feedback.

Few days after the initial instructions the first Monologues were received. Two months later a FIRST intervention was placed. SE and AP observed resistance to writing Monologues from some students while others used the method intensely right after it was introduced. To overcome resistance *Specific Questions* were posted on the classroom's website. A SECOND intervention was placed close to end of the study (6 months after the beginning of the study). To get a mark it was obligatory to submit a PGEM or a statement why the PGEM was not submitted. At the end of their research projects the students were given a questionnaire about how they perceived the PGEM method. The individual PGEMs were qualitatively analyzed by SE using a matrix of 11 categories (Criteria (reader's perspective): 1=medium 2=strong 3=very strong).

- 1) Honest self-reflection including analyzing own behavior (authenticity)
- 2) Personal sharing autobiographically
- 3) Talks (writes) about the assignment in general
- 4) Talks about the assignment in detail
- 5) Talks about emotional approach to assignment (motivation)
- 6) Talks about family problems
- 7) Mentions stress symptoms
- 8) Talks about joy of completing the assignment
- 9) Talks about professional future in connection with the assignment
- 10) Talks about the area of interest in which the assignment is written
- 11) Talks about writing PGEM versus diary

Thanks to Alex Le Schmoie for technical support across the ocean

Results

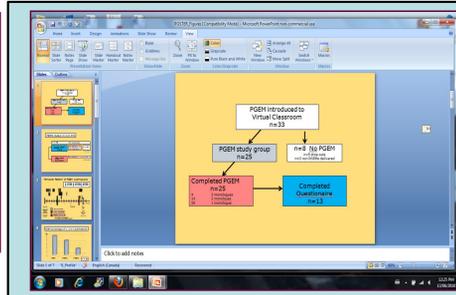


Figure 1: PGEM-Participants and drop out rates

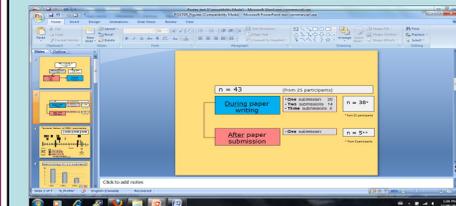


Figure 2: PGEMs Output (n) over time

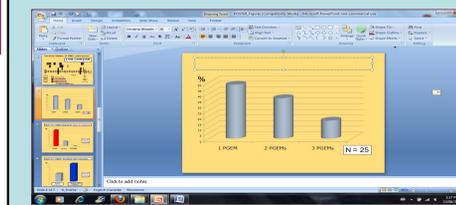


Figure 3: 1, 2 or 3 PGEM submissions (in %)

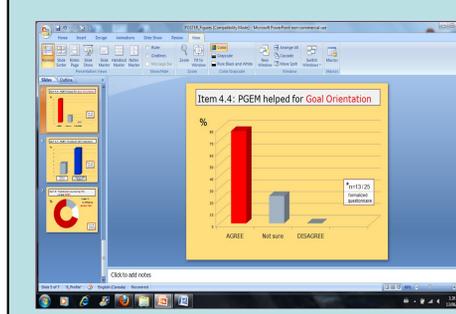


Figure 6: PGEM helped for Goal Orientation

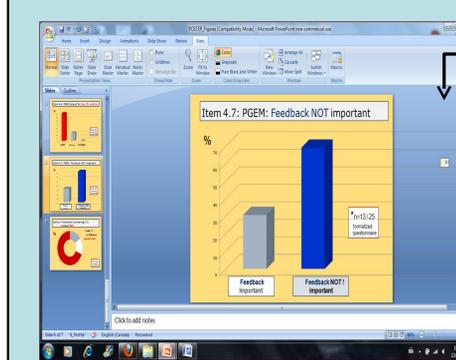


Figure 7: PGEM and Feedback

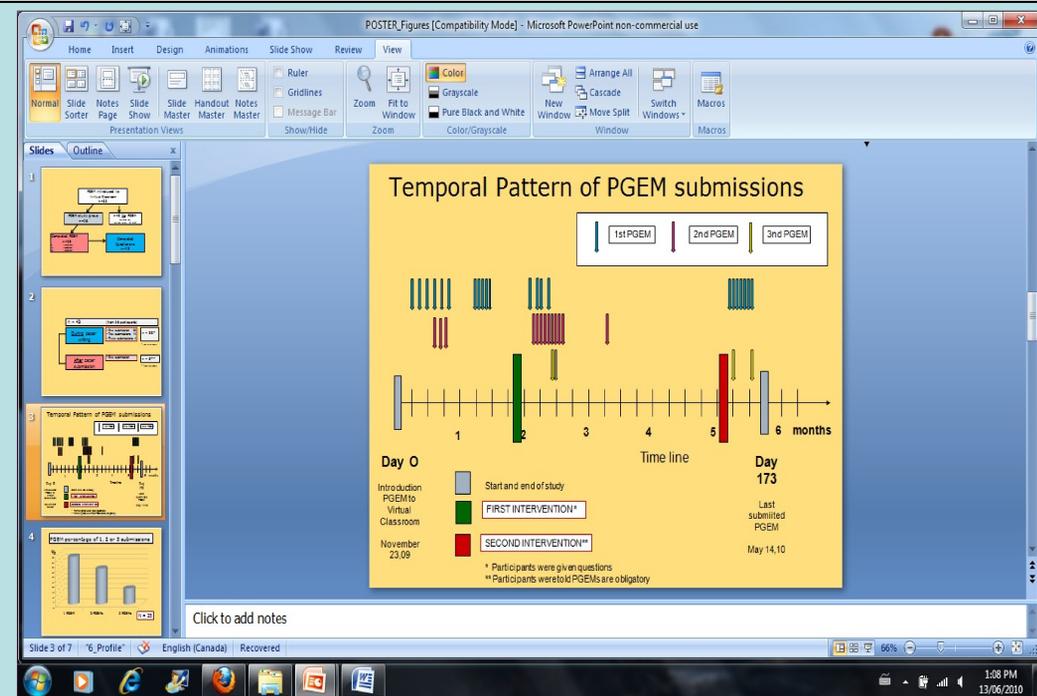


Figure 4: Temporal Pattern of PGEM Submissions

Temporal pattern of PGEM submission

After the introduction of the PGEM in classroom 4 students started to write PGEMs immediately, 3 of them submitted a second PGEM within 2 weeks. Eleven 1st PGEMs were submitted within the first 6 weeks. The FIRST intervention after 8 weeks (reflective questions) induced in a significant proportion (n=8) the submission of a 2nd PGEM. Few 1st PGEM and two 3rd PGEMs were submitted. The SECOND intervention shortly before study end induced five 1st PGEMs. Two 3rd PGEMs were submitted at this late stage of the study. See Figure 4.

Item	Statement	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Item 4.1	I could generate new ideas	17%	38%	25%	18%	2%
Item 4.2	My motivation to write my paper increased	0%	36%	25%	36%	2%
Item 4.3	To reflect about my personal situation has helped me to focus on my paper	17%	38%	25%	18%	2%
Item 4.4	To reflect my personal working style has helped me to become more goal oriented	36%	38%	25%	18%	2%
Item 4.5	I enjoyed writing monologues	36%	38%	25%	18%	2%
Item 4.6	I asked for feedback	36%	38%	25%	18%	2%
Item 4.7	I found feedback important	36%	38%	25%	18%	2%

Figure 5: Seven Items for Perception of PGEM

Students participation and PGEM submission rate

There was a participation rate of 75.8% in this study (Figure 1): 25 out of 33 students of the Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria used the opportunity – presented in a virtual classroom - to write PGEMs parallel to their paper/project assignment. The 8 Non-responders consisted of 5 students who initially dropped out of class; 3 students never delivered a PGEM. 2 of them expressed via email, that they do not want to write PGEMs (Figure 1). 4 out of 25 students submitted 3 PGEMs (16%), 9 out of 25 patients submitted 2 PGEMs (36%), 12 only 1 PGEM (48%), see Figure 2 and 3. 5 out of 25 sent PGEMs after their assignment was finished after the second intervention.

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Questionnaire

13 out of 25 completed a questionnaire with 12 questions (Figure 2). 7 questions (Figure 5) dealt with the perception of the PGEM (items 4.1 to 4.7). 5 items did not produce any remarkable results. 2 items are described in more detail. Item 4.4: 77.9% considered PGEM helpful for goal orientation (Figure 6). Item 4.7: 69.2% found feedback NOT important (item 4.7, Figure 7). 69.2% would prefer PGEMs rather than writing a traditional journals (Figure 8).

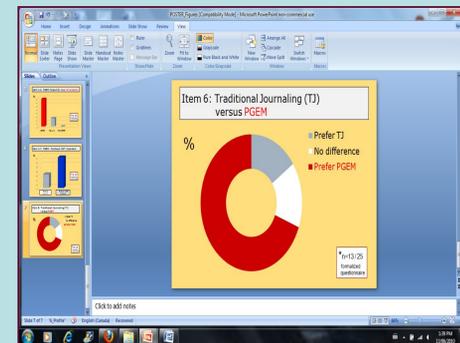


Figure 8:

Qualitative results: PGEM content using 11 categories

The first Monologues contained mainly biographical material and honest self-reflection including analyzing own behavior. After the FIRST intervention, 2 months later, the content was more about the assignment in general, some detailed questions about how to finish the assignment and the personal working style. Many students mentioned various forms of stress while trying to complete their projects. After the SECOND intervention students wrote about pride to have finished the work, their marks and about the relief to have gotten it done. One student could express himself better via photography then by writing. So he sent photographs expressing his emotions. Important feedback for the University of Vienna is one student's experience. He has chosen a topic where he only could find literature in English. So because of that he dropped the very interesting topic and switched over to a topic where he could find more literature published in German. This is an observation which is worrisome for the quality of research which comes out of the University of Vienna. Professors could have helped here in an early phase if they would have known it. Many of the students preferred writing Email Monologues over traditional Journals. They experienced an emotion of being understood and cared for with someone present in their process of achieving the assignment in class. They built up trust very easily and shared many personal details of their lives and how they try to cope with those. Some of the student's monologues were very well written essays, conveying vividly scenarios the students wanted to share. The PGEM Method helped to establish cohesiveness in class. Even if the professor sometimes could not spend enough time with all of the students because of the large numbers of students at the University of Vienna they still felt they got enough feedback to stick with their work and not drop out of class prematurely. Two thirds of students did not even request feedback after sending their monologues, which approved the initial hypothesis that writing monologues to a professional reader induces a self healing process in which no feedback is necessary. It is enough to acknowledge receipt of the monologue and the fact it was read. One third of the students found feedback important, mostly if they had specific questions about their work or if they had doubts about being good enough or doing the right thing. In that case some sentences of encouragement by SE helped to further continue with their work.

Conclusions

- Writing **Professional Guided Email Monologues** with and without feedback helps students to finish their class work.
- The personal approach to students (qualitative research) helps to create valuable feedback (in this case for the university) which would have been overlooked on students' satisfaction questionnaires (quantitative research).
- PGEM Method outmatches traditional journaling because the presence of a trained professional in the process creates a safe environment in which the students can grow more easily.
- PGEM is especially helpful in virtual classrooms. PGEM replaces the informal exchange and friendships (sharing of personal / biographical details) normally built in class. PGEM provides an opportunity for relationship building to an outsider (here change agent SE).
- This feasibility study has been successful despite significant methodological limitations.
- Prospective, standardized studies in larger populations may help to better understand the power and mechanism of PGEM.

Reference: 1. Eden, S. Writing email Monologues: a creative method for initiating change. Abstract and presentation, E-Learn 2009 Vancouver, BC, www.aace.org