

School Name [Dakota State University, Madison, SD](#)

Course Name [General Psychology](#)

Course Format [Flipped/Traditional and Online](#)

Key Results Writing improves students' ability to retain information over time. After implementing Writing Space, test scores increased by over 7 percent.

Submitted by

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Course Materials

Psychology: An Exploration by Ciccarelli and White with MyPsychLab

The students who take this introductory survey of the field are not psychology majors, and this may be the only college-level psychology course they take. Because of this, one of my four key learning outcomes for the course is for students to be able to critically and purposefully apply course concepts and theories to contemporary issues.

I've used MyPsychLab for years as a means of engaging the students and implementing a "flipped classroom" approach. Assigning videos and other media activities tied to specific learning objectives in our textbook, combined with weekly quizzes administered through my school's learning management system (D2L), allows me to provide more active learning experiences in the classroom. As a result, our class time is devoted to applying important concepts rather than simply repeating what students have already read outside of class.

In addition to my focus on critical thinking and application of course content in class, I have always wanted to assign writing as a way to help students move beyond simple memorization of facts. Writing asks students to engage in higher-level thinking, leading to deeper understanding and long-term retention of the material. Having approximately 100 students per semester—about 70 in my traditional/face-to-face section and 30 in my online section—made it impossible for me to assign and grade writing in the past. Without TAs to help, there was no way I could provide timely and meaningful feedback on my students' written work. Because of this, I decided to integrate MyPsychLab's Writing Space assignments into the course for the first time this past semester. Writing Space's auto-graded assignments give students instant feedback on the structure and content of their essays, as well as instruction on the more mechanical aspects of writing. It also checks students' work for plagiarism with its built-in Turnitin feature.

Implementation

Writing Space assignments ask students to recall what they have read in their textbooks and then apply this knowledge to real world situations. For example, in the Learning chapter, students are presented with a scenario in which they must create a one-month behavior modification program based on the principles of operant conditioning they have studied. This type of writing assignment helps students develop a deeper level of understanding: they must understand both the basic concepts and how these must fit together to provide a realistic solution. Further, they get valuable practice honing a range of written communication skills as they put forth these proposals for programs informed by concepts they have learned.

Students completed seven writing assignments throughout the semester, which counted for a total of ten percent of their overall grade. Since I don't cover every learning objective in the textbook, I was sure to assign topics that my students would also be assessed on later in their quizzes and tests. I also implemented regular media assignments, including simulations and videos within MyPsychLab.

Benefits

Auto-feedback writing assignments allow me to integrate writing into the course where in the past this had not been possible.

Writing helps students retain course content over multiple weeks and multiple learning objectives.

Assessments

| | |
|------------|---|
| 30 percent | MyPsychLab (Writing Space's auto-feedback assignments; media assignments) |
| 25 percent | Weekly Quizzes |
| 20 percent | Flipped Classroom Group Assignments |
| 15 percent | Tests (four) |
| 10 percent | Quick Quizzes |

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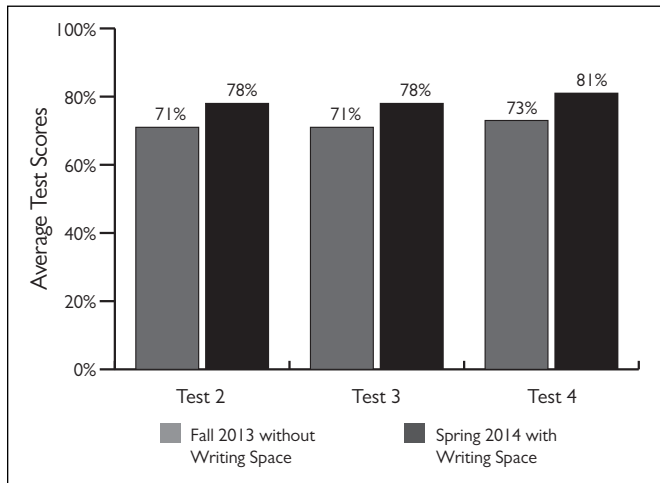


Figure 1. Average student test score for tests 2-4 without Writing Space (Fall 2013, $n=83$) vs. with Writing Space (Spring 2014, $n=100$). Includes both online and traditional sections.

Results and data

I was curious to see how the addition of Writing Space’s auto-feedback writing assignments would impact student grades on both low-stakes “quick quizzes” and “weekly quizzes,” as well as grades on higher-stakes tests covering learning outcomes from several chapters. Because the first writing assignment wasn’t assigned until after the first test was completed, this analysis focuses on tests 2, 3 and 4. Student scores on tests 2-4 increased 7-8 points compared to the previous semester without Writing Space (figure 1). Interestingly, students’ scores did *not* increase on the first test, which was taken before they began the writing assignments.

The results also indicate that performance on writing assignments is a strong predictor of success on test scores. Students who passed more writing assignments performed better on their tests (figure 2). In addition, there was no correlation between students simply attempting the writing assignment and student performance on tests. And, there was no correlation between the number of writing assignments passed and student performance on weekly quizzes. This points to the fact that the weekly quizzes usually require students to memorize smaller amounts of material for a short time vs. the tests, which demand deeper and more long-term understanding of course content, which writing helps students achieve.

The student experience

One student came to my office after completing a few writing assignments to tell me proudly that she’d “figured it out!” It’s great to see students progress in their learning and finally reach the point where they really “get it.”

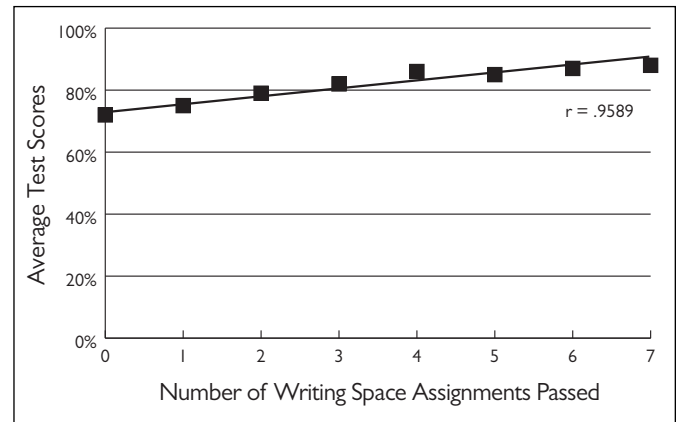


Figure 2. Correlation between the number of writing assignments a student passed vs. the student’s average score on tests 2-4 (Spring 2014, $n=100$). Includes both online and traditional sections.

Some students did struggle with the writing; to address this I plan to make a few changes in how I implement Writing Space next semester. Students who visited me during office hours found it helpful to see examples of good essays and poor essays. I think this type of activity could benefit the entire class; therefore I plan to integrate at least one writing assignment as part of an in-class activity. I also plan to introduce Writing Space at the very start of the semester. At that time I’ll be able to explain to students that some writing assignments might not be tied to the exact content that we covered in class that week, but it will help to prepare them for their next test. I will also explain more fully how essays are scored and how logical organization and solid development of ideas are the most important parts of a successful essay.

Conclusion

Integrating writing into my course with Writing Space has helped my students develop better critical thinking skills and perform better on tests. Next semester I plan to assign writing right from the start and to integrate writing into some of the classroom meetings, which I think will lead to all kinds of new and interesting discussions. Another instructional strategy I’m considering is “Peer Review”—a more student-centered approach to learning where students learn as much from the review process itself as from writing their essays. Participating in such peer reviews helps students make the transition from writing primarily for themselves or for an instructor to writing for a broader, more diverse audience, an important communication skill that will help prepare them for success in more advanced courses.