

Product Name MyPsychLab/MyVirtualChild*
 Course Name Psychology of Childhood and Adolescence
 Credit Hours Three

Key Results MyVirtualChild is an engaging, interactive way for students to apply core concepts to an (almost) real situation.

Title/Author

The Developing Child, by Helen Bee and Denise Boyd

Implementation

Instructors of developmental science courses often struggle to find ways of demonstrating the foundational issues of development (e.g., nature vs. nurture, the interrelatedness of social, cognitive, and physical development). Once students do learn these concepts, it is frequently difficult to find meaningful ways for them to apply their newfound knowledge. We decided to use MyVirtualChild to achieve both aims.

The way I assign MyVirtualChild is by having students raise their child to age 18 at the very beginning of the course. I tell students that this is how most people raise their kids, without taking Child Psychology first. Students may “raise” their child however they want—their grade depends on how well they apply course concepts to understand their child’s development, not on how well their child turns out. I encourage them to seek advice from a partner or from friends, parents, or parenting manuals. Students then submit a short paper answering questions such as, “How did your child turn out?” and “Who did you ask for help?” so I know that everyone has raised their child.

Throughout the semester as we complete each topic, students take an exam and then write a paper, citing as many course concepts as possible. Class discussions often relate to what students learned by raising their virtual child.

Assessments

75 percent Exams (four)
 25 percent MyVirtualChild papers (four)

The Student Experience

Four sections used MyVirtualChild during fall 2008. At the end of the semester, 51 students from those sections participated in an assessment of their experiences with the program. They answered 17 Likert-type questions on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and four open-ended questions (table 1).

Students agreed that MyVirtualChild helped them learn important developmental concepts. They very strongly preferred MyVirtualChild to other types of projects, including observing real children. In addition, they indicated that they were very engaged with the MyVirtualChild project—they thought it was fun and were proud of how their child turned out.

*MyVirtualChild is both a feature within MyPsychLab and a standalone product.

| Question | Mean | One-Sample t |
|---|------|--------------|
| MyVirtualChild reinforced my understanding of: | | |
| how the physical, cognitive and social aspects of development interact. | 3.98 | 7.22 |
| how parenting styles affect a child's development. | 4.22 | 9.19 |
| how a child's physical environment is related to cognitive development. | 3.84 | 7.22 |
| MyVirtualChild helped me understand: | | |
| the effects of parenting decisions on children's development. | 3.94 | 8.05 |
| how development in infancy and early childhood is related to later development. | 3.94 | 6.20 |
| I would rather do _____ than the MyVirtualChild project. | | |
| a traditional research paper | 1.59 | 8.75 |
| an oral presentation | 1.71 | 7.28 |
| a group project | 1.78 | 6.84 |
| an observation project on a real child | 2.16 | 4.42 |
| The MyVirtualChild project was fun. | 4.24 | 8.90 |
| I'm proud of how my MyVirtualChild turned out. | 4.43 | 11.65 |

Table 1. Mean Student Assessment of MyVirtualChild (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree)

Note: One-sample t tested against an expected value of 3, $df=50$. $p<.001$

Results and Data

Although my assessments focus on the correct application of concepts, one powerful benefit of MyVirtualChild is that it shows how genetics, parenting choices, and outside factors can combine to influence a child's outcome. While not the sole factor, students clearly see how their parenting practices have a big impact on their child's development.

Conclusion

The experience of raising a virtual child proved to be very valuable. Students could see the consequences of their parenting decisions, the influence of early experiences on later development, and the interaction of different developmental forces. Equally as important, they had fun while doing it.

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