School Name	Wilbur Wright College, City Colleges of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Course Name	General Psychology
Course Format	Face-to-face

Key Results Students who completed all Writing Space assignments earned significantly higher exam scores than students who skipped one or more Writing Space assignments.

Submitted by
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Course materials
Psychology: An Exploration, Ciccarelli and White; MyPsychLab

Background

Wilbur Wright College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago, is a 2-year urban institution. Forty-four percent of its 23,000 students attend part-time, managing work and family responsibilities along with their academic goals. The general psychology course is taken by students in a variety of majors, along with many students who have not yet chosen their major. The course is a survey of psychology and a study of the sensory and perceptual processes: learning, thinking, remembering, emotional behavior, motivation, mechanism of adjustment, and personality.

Challenges and Goals

The development of critical thinking skills is an important student learning outcome in this course. In the past I have incorporated writing assignments to help students develop and demonstrate critical thinking; however, assigning and then grading the writing of more than 60 students per semester is extremely time-consuming. Though I realized that many of my students struggled with writing, I didn't have a practical way to administer ongoing writing practice throughout the semester before I incorporated Writing Space into the course. Writing Space provides preloaded, quality prompts that I can assign for each chapter. The preloaded rubrics, combined with auto-grading, provide students with valuable feedback on their writing mechanics and the content of their essays. Students are often unwilling or unable to take advantage of our on-campus writing center for help with their written work. Now, with Writing Space, students are getting the feedback they need to improve their writing, and can access this feedback anytime, from anywhere.

Implementation

My syllabus lets students know from the first day of class that access to MyPsychLab is required. I assign 11 short writing assignments within MyPsychLab's Writing Space, starting with chapter 1. Because these assignments are intended as low-stakes writing practice, students are only asked to complete one draft. However, I often "return for rewrite", essentially giving the student an opportunity to write a second draft if I think they need it. In addition to Writing Space assignments, students complete 10 MyPsychLab simulations that expand on particular topics covered in the textbook. I select 18 simulations and allow students to pick the 10 topics that most interest them. To ensure that students stay on track throughout the course, I provide specific due dates for each MyPsychLab assignment and do not allow for late submissions. Staying up-to-date on assignments is also important for students to be ready to participate in class, which I encourage and find helps in their understanding of new concepts. I enjoy teaching and do many in-class activities that depend on students helping me with the demonstration. If students do not complete their assigned reading and MyPsychLab assessments, they do not benefit as much from the lecture.

Benefits

• Increased number of opportunities to practice writing.

• Responding to quality prompts helps students develop critical thinking skills.

• Auto-grading based on a standard rubric offers students more consistent scoring by eliminating any human bias.

• Frequent writing assignments with automatic feedback help students better prepare for exams.

• Students who engage in course content outside of class through reading, writing, and interactive simulations are better prepared to participate during lecture and in-class activities.

"Many students reported that Writing Space assignments forced them to go back, read, and think more critically about the material in the book."
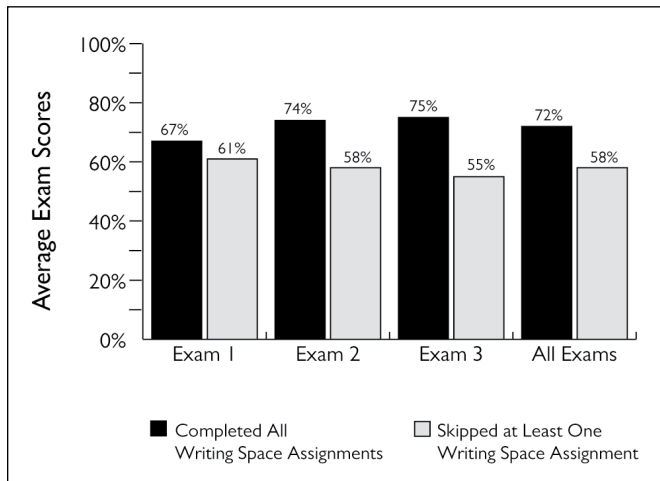

Figure 1. Average Exam Scores for Students Who Completed All Writing Space Assignments (*n*=32) vs. Students Who Skipped at Least One Writing Space Assignment (*n*=29), Fall 2014

Assessments

63 percent	Exams (three)
22 percent	MyPsychLab assignments (Writing Space; Simulations)
12 percent	Writing (Journal analysis; Reflection paper)
3 percent	Other (Growth Mindset; Pre-course Survey)

Results and Data

To measure Writing Space's impact on learning, student performance was evaluated based on participation in Writing Space assignments during the fall 2014 semester. The results show that students who completed all of their Writing Space assignments (11 total assignments) scored significantly higher on their exams, with p = .0069. These students averaged 72 percent on exams—fourteen points higher than students who skipped one or more Writing Space assignment (Figure 1). Exams are non-cumulative and consist of both multiple choice and short answer questions. For the purposes of this study, a skipped assignment was considered one with a score of 0. I believe this data points to the fact that frequent writing practice, assigned through Writing Space, helps students to understand concepts better and retain course content, leading to improved performance on exams.

The Student Experience

Writing assignments challenge students more than reading or multiple-choice assignments alone. As a result, many of my students did not necessarily "enjoy" Writing Space; however, they did overwhelmingly state that they know their writing has improved because of Writing Space. One student told me that as a result of using Writing Space she now has a better understanding of psychology as a field of study than she would have had she not completed frequent Writing Space assignments. Another student (who earned an A in the class) stated that she thought Writing Space was a great review for exams. I am happy to hear this type of feedback. My goal for my students is to not only see them succeed in the course, but also to help them progress to the next stage of their education which includes selecting a major.

Conclusion

Writing Space has given me a way to assign quality writing prompts that ask students to think critically, analyze, and apply course content. Many students reported that Writing Space assignments forced them to go back, read, and think more critically about the material in the book. In an effort to see the benefits of Writing Space assignments applied to a greater percentage of my students, I have made a few changes to my implementation for the spring 2015 semester, including:

- At the start of the semester, I brought my students to a computer lab for one class so we could complete the first Writing Space assignment together. This seems to have greatly increased students' confidence in their ability to complete Writing Space assignments on their own.

- I've reduced the number of Writing Space assignments from 11 to 10, and now require two drafts of each writing assignment.

- To motivate students to complete *all* Writing Space assignments, each Writing Space assignment is now due before students take the corresponding exam. Students now see these assignments as part of their exam preparation, rather than as an "extra" assignment.

References

http://www.ccc.edu/menu/pages/facts-statistics.aspx

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