

School Name Ashford University, San Diego, CA

Course Names Early Childhood Curriculum and Methods; Cognitive Development of Infants and Young Children; Teaching, Learning, and Leading in the 21st Century

Course Format Online

Key Results

In a randomized, blind study comparing the change in students' writing in a pilot group of four sections using Pearson Writer and a control group of four sections without access to Pearson Writer, all sections in the pilot group showed significant improvement in their writing skills while three of the four control sections showed a decline in writing performance over the course of the study.

Participating faculty

Maureen K. Lienau, Ph.D., Chair, Cognitive Studies, Department of Education; Alan Belcher, Ph.D.; Tamecca Fitzpatrick, Ph.D.; Jackie Kyger, Ph.D.; and Latisha Shipley, Ph.D.

Course materials

Jaruszewicz, *Curriculum and Methods for Early Childhood Educators*; Siegler and Alibali, *Children's Thinking*; Newman, *Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century*—all with Pearson Writer in pilot sections

Ashford University faculty and administrators have identified poor writing skills as the single most significant impediment to students' academic success. Therefore, to advance its goals of improving achievement, persistence, completion, and career placement, Ashford is investigating ways to help students become stronger academic writers. With the needs of online students in mind, Ashford recently evaluated mobile-friendly, anytime-access applications capable of delivering high-quality writing resources, instruction, and feedback. After a thorough review of available options, Ashford selected Pearson Writer to put high-quality writing assistance within easy reach of every student. To properly evaluate Pearson Writer's impact on student writing, Ashford and Pearson agreed to collaborate on a randomized, blind efficacy study of Pearson Writer with Ashford students.

In spring 2014, students in four classes, two graduate-level and two undergraduate, were randomly placed in either a control or pilot section—for a total of eight sections altogether. Students assigned to the pilot sections were invited to register for Pearson Writer at no charge; students in the control sections did not receive access to Pearson Writer. Students in all classes submitted weekly writing assignments as part of their course assessment. Three of these assignments—those from week 1,

week 3, and week 5—were also submitted to a panel of trained writing instructors to be scored against a rubric designed by Ashford's English department faculty. Scorers had no knowledge of whether they were working on papers from the pilot or the control sections. The student papers were submitted with no personally identifying information; each student was assigned a code.

According to Ashford's rubric, scorers evaluated students' written work and assigned papers a score from 5 to 1 where 5 equals distinguished and 1 equals No Performance (Distinguished, Proficient, Basic, Below Expectation, No Performance) in three areas:

- Applies the conventions of standard written English with proficiency
- Composes written assignments using the specified style of documentation
- Analyzes information gathered from various sources

Results and data

Once all of the scores were in, the change in students' writing was measured from week 1 to week 5 by comparing the total score on the first paper to the total score on the final paper and aggregating that measurement for the entire section. In the case of Early Childhood Curriculum & Methods (ECE 311), the week 1 assignment used only 2 of 3 parts of the rubric (no outside sources were required), and so the change was measured from week 3 to week 5. Students who dropped, did not submit the required assignments, or did not register for Pearson Writer (in the case of the pilots) were not counted.

Control	Total	Drop	Not Submit	n
EDU650 KAK	19	8	1	10
ECE353 HOC	13	0	1	12
ECE311 XJZ	20	2	4	14
EDU650 MNE	18	6	1	11
TOTAL	70	16	7	47

Pilot	Total	Drop	Not Submit	Non-PW	n
ECE311 CJB	19	0	7	1	11
EDU650 RED	23	6	1	1	15
ECE353 GMG	19	1	5	4	9
EDU650 GSW	14	2	1	0	11
TOTAL	75	9	14	6	46

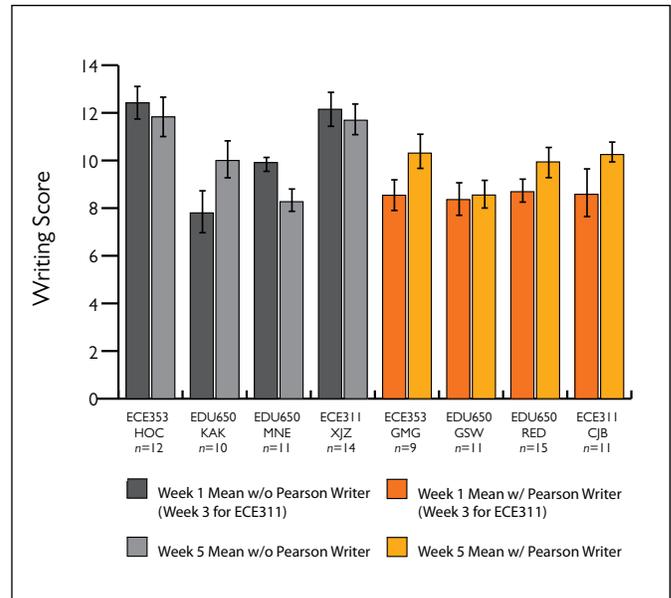


Figure 1. Writing Score Gains without and with Pearson Writer, Spring 2014

Raw Writing Scores

Control sections

EDU650 KAK week 1 to week 5 change: +22

ECE353 HOC week 1 to week 5 change: -7

ECE311 XJZ week 3 to week 5 change: -6

EDU650 MNE week 1 to week 5 change: -18

Total change for control classes: -9

Pilot sections

EDU650 GSW week 1 to week 5 change: +2

EDU650 RED week 1 to week 5 change: +15

ECE353 GMG week 1 to week 5 change: +11

ECE311 CJB week 3 to week 5 change: +19

Total change for pilot classes: +47

Results

Students in all four pilot sections with Pearson Writer improved their writing. In the control sections without Pearson Writer, one class improved while the other three showed a decline in their writing (figure 1).

Notes on the data

- More students dropped out of the control sections (23 percent) than the pilot sections (12 percent) and those who dropped out of the control sections did so earlier in the course. Did the support of Pearson Writer motivate less-abled students to persist where students without that support gave up?
- The control section with the highest percentage of drops, EDU650 KAK, also showed the highest overall improvement in writing scores. Eight out of nineteen students dropped, seven in the first week, for a total drop percentage of 42 percent. Did the weakest and even the borderline competent students drop out, leaving only the strongest students? And would the support of Pearson Writer have helped some of the eight students who dropped to persist?

“We know that optional resources won’t be accessed by some students. Integrating Pearson Writer throughout the curriculum would guarantee that all of our students receive high-quality assistance to strengthen their academic writing, accessible anywhere at any time—while they continue to pursue their individual study goals.”

Limitations of the study

- From the week 1 assignment to the week 5 assignment, the interval for improving students’ writing was just four weeks.
- Dashboard analytics functionality—displaying students’ Pearson Writer login status, number of active projects, and application features most accessed—was under development at the time of the pilot and therefore not available to the pilot instructors. Instructors had to rely on students’ self-reporting regarding their use of Pearson Writer.

The student experience

The pilot instructors reported various responses from students. Some students expressed frustration that Pearson Writer gave them one more thing to do in an already busy schedule. This reaction was far more common among the undergraduate students who, despite deficits in their writing skills, had been passing their courses. Conversely, students in EDU650, the first course in the graduate Education program, expressed gratitude that Pearson Writer was being made available to them. These students, returning to higher education after an absence, recognized that their lack of solid writing skills could imperil their academic progress and success.

Among all students who responded to the pre-pilot student survey, 95 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “Solid academic skills are essential to meeting my goals for success in college.”

Selected results from the students’ post-pilot survey responses

- Asked to rate Pearson Writer’s overall effectiveness in helping them to improve their writing and succeed in the course, 62 percent of students surveyed replied *Above Average* or *Superior*.
- Students rated the following features of Pearson Writer as *Helpful* or *Extremely Helpful*:

- 100%** Writing Review
- 81%** Cite a Source
- 80%** Writer’s Guide
- 72%** My Projects

- After using Pearson Writer, are you more confident in your academic/scholarly writing skills?

77% *A Little More Confident* or *Much More Confident*

- Which academic writing skills have you improved?

60% Revising

60% Grammar

40% Using Appropriate Documentation Style (APA, MLA, etc.)

28% Editing

28% Finding Sources

16% Drafting

16% Analyzing Information from Various Sources

- Would you like to continue using Pearson Writer?

73% Yes

- Would you recommend Pearson Writer to another student?

88% Yes

Selected student comments

“So much easier than the book I used previously!”

“I like the way Pearson Writer helps you to revise the whole paper. It is a great tool for writing!”

“I use Pearson Writer outside this class and at work. I have recommended it to my husband, a professor at a community college. I suggested that his students use Pearson Writer for their written assignments.”

“Great tool! I think every college student should use Pearson Writer.”

Best practices

Students were not offered extra credit for using Pearson Writer nor were students who did not use Pearson Writer penalized in any way. However, instructors strongly encouraged students in the pilot sections to use Pearson Writer. One of the instructors reported, “Often, when I received a sub-par piece of writing, I would submit that work to Writing Review in Pearson Writer and send the marked-up sample back to the student with a note that said, in essence, ‘Here’s the guidance available in Pearson Writer to help you strengthen your writing. Please take advantage!’”

Student feedback gathered at the end of the pilot (via journal submissions and survey responses) indicates that a majority of the participants found Pearson Writer valuable and hoped to continue using it.

The pilot instructors teaching the graduate courses required their students to devote two of their weekly journal reflections to their experience working with Pearson Writer—at the beginning and the end of the course—to encourage students to evaluate the connection between cultivating strong academic writing skills and succeeding in a graduate program.

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Conclusion

In a post-pilot survey, instructors responded:

- **100%** Yes, I would like to continue using Pearson Writer.
- **100%** Yes, I would recommend Pearson Writer to another instructor.

Asked how Pearson Writer could be made more powerful or easier to use for students, one of the pilot instructors expressed the consensus of the four instructors, “The application really couldn’t be simpler to use. The way to improve Pearson Writer for students is to incorporate it, across the university, as a required component, so that students would use it as a matter of course. Ideally, Pearson Writer would be embedded within the Ashford portal. Students would submit all written work through Pearson Writer, review the feedback and revise the work, then submit the revised paper for grading. We know that optional resources won’t be accessed by some students. Integrating Pearson Writer throughout the curriculum would guarantee that all of our students receive high-quality assistance to strengthen their academic writing, accessible anywhere at any time—while they continue to pursue their individual study goals.”

This efficacy study documents that students in the pilot sections using Pearson Writer demonstrated significant improvement in their writing. Students without access to Pearson Writer in the control sections did not.