

Introduction to Psychology (PSYC 1101) Course Redesign at eCore

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During the course of an online Psychology 1101 revision, Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and designers created 10 multi-modal “Positive Thinking Corner” pages, each of which present a Positive Psychology topic relevant both to its lesson and to students’ lives. Videos, podcasts, and articles are linked, and students are offered their choice of two informal “reflections” to write, weaving their own experiences in with the material. The overwhelming positive student response has reinforced the notion that personalizing learning engages an emotional aspect that helps students bridge what is frequently a developmental growth spurt, particularly as it pertains to their self-concept and relationship to academia.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Goals for the formal revision of Introduction to Psychology, which began in earnest in February of 2018, included increasing student engagement, updating course content, and addressing equitable educational outcomes.

Our approach to the revision was both an acknowledgement that the course was not “broken,” as well as an invitation that anything was on the table. We considered this tone crucial to create a protected intellectual space in which the team itself could grow and take risks, both conceptually and practically, that would translate into the ability to accommodate and connect with students online in a meaningful way. In this way, the revision process would mirror the learning process we hoped to create in the online classroom — that students are not “broken” or empty vessels to be filled, but come with their own experiences and knowledge which need courage, imagination, and guidance to connect with the wider academic world.

The discussion on the use of the Reflection Exercises in particular centered around a way to infuse the course with personal applications that would help to scaffold the material, reflect the influence of the growing subfield of Positive Psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and also fulfill one of the course’s learning objectives: “Apply course content to everyday life - making better decisions; enhancing relationships; increasing self-understanding.” Metaphorically we envisioned these exercises, with both their supports and tasks, as the belay crew for the nascent, developing academic.

METHODS

We added videos and podcasts to lend a human interest/storytelling element to the curriculum and break up the “wall of text” which can result from endless reading, and further scaffolded the lessons in the course, such as through the use of self-assessments, flash cards, and other supports. For instance, Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) wrote introductory video scripts for each OpenStax chapter, which our

Multimedia designer then paired with visuals from the text to produce what we called “Fireside Chats.” These videos acted as scaffolding measures, framing the work ahead and covering the highlights of the material in each Lesson.

One professor had requested that we include topics that had not previously been covered in the course, including Health/Positive Psychology. To this end, we incorporated a series of informal “Reflection Exercises” under the moniker of a “Positive Thinking Corner” page in each of the 10 Lessons. These pages presented Positive Psychology topics related to each Lesson at hand (i.e., Gratitude for the Memory Lesson, “Grit” for Research, Music and Meditation for the Therapy and Treatment Lesson, Forest Kindergarten for Development, and the concept of “Flow” for BioPsychology and Neuroscience). We included TED Talks, other short videos, and links to articles on the topic at hand, which might benefit the students, and then gave them a choice of two questions or activities on which to reflect in writing. These exercises gave the students the opportunity to scaffold the material on to their own experiences.

OUTCOMES

Although the ABC rate for PSYC 1101 has gone down 2-3% percentage points since the revision (we attribute this to the increased rigor of the course overall), it remains generally high at around 75% or above, and the course completion rate has maintained at around 90-92% as enrollments have steadily increased. Students frequently comment on the Reflection Exercises as a positive part of their course experience in end-of-semester surveys, and instructors for the shorter, 8-week semesters have told us that they’ve offered students the option to drop the Reflection Exercises as a concession to the accelerated timeline, to which students have resisted. One instructor forwarded the following note from a student:

“As a side note—and unrelated to this particular exercise, I wanted to take a moment to tell you how fascinating I have found these reflection exercises. Initially, I was a little close-minded or skeptical about them, but I have since come to really enjoy them. In fact, so much so, that they are now my favorite part of the weekly activities. They not only push me to explore myself and the world in new ways, but they have also given me unique tools and ideas to find peace. I truly commend you on the structure of your class.”

When we read the Reflections submitted by students, we get a sense that we’ve created a bridge between academic content and personal/emotional involvement. When students think of schoolwork in colorful, personal terms, rather than standard right or wrong academic answers, what emerges are developmentally healthy and socially conscious opportunities to contextualize and expand the meaning of learning. The reflections help us and them reach heights of personal, social, and intellectual achievement. In their essays, we often feel a quintessential humanness. It is a beautiful thing. It may have a lot to do with it being Psychology that they are studying, but why not try and get them to think of Math, Geography, or other subjects in terms of emotions, and how that might affect Mother Earth or humanity as a whole.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

In light of this response, eCore has gone on to include informal journal entries in the first Lesson of ENGL 1101, where students are prompted to take an online Critical Thinking quiz and reflect on the results, describe a memory in sensory writing along the lines of Eudora Welty, or are introduced to Inquiry in Research through one of Ballenger’s Brainstorming activities. Informal, reflective writing can also serve

as a metacognitive checkpoint, one we've leveraged in "Post-Assignment Feedback and Reflection Plans," where students plan out and explain how they can use instructor feedback and change their study strategies to improve their own performance. We've also included four Reflection Exercises in the development of HIST 2112, again offering students the option to tell how and where their families might show up in historical census data and other immigration documents, or discuss their surprise over the initial support for abortion among evangelicals, and what political forces worked to strategically change that. We've also, just this spring, increased the grade percentage of the PSYC 1101 Reflection Exercises from 5 to 10%.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

The reflection exercises perform at both the personal and course content learning levels. Reflection material was designed to be approachable — that is, non-directed for gender or SES — and to have broad appeal. Because students are prompted to reflect personally on their own experiences (on which they are experts), the reflections promote feelings of success and contribution to the course, and generally build academic confidence, as well as trust with the instructor (the only person with whom the reflections were shared) and a personal connection with the material. The reflection exercises also promote an equitable tone in the online environment — implying that everyone's points are valued (though they might have more or less quiz points, or academic experience than others), and that their various and diverse life events "count" and not only add to the course but connect the students deeply to the curriculum. This result is in stark contrast to the idea that students' experiences need to be "corrected," or the idea that they take up too much valuable real estate in most face-to-face classes. Additionally, by becoming more familiar with personal aspects of their students' lives, professors are more prone to empathize with them, to reach out and respond to students, which not only supports students, but aids in their own development, both pedagogically and humanistically. We are enthusiastic about our future use of reflection exercises as a pedagogical tool — this may be something of a panacea for the online learning environment.

⁶ Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1),5-14.