

Combining General Psychology With A Study Strategies Course

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Abstract

In recent years, instructors at many colleges have noticed that first-year students taking their initial coursework are struggling with the demands of college-level classes. At Kent State—Stark, the first line of defense for these academically challenged students is either a reading or study strategies course. The study strategies course is a 3-credit, semester-long course providing strategies for how to learn and study more effectively. In the last year, some students have been co-enrolled in both the study strategies course and a general psychology course. Grades for students who were co-enrolled were compared to grades for subjects enrolled only in general psychology to see whether co-enrollment was beneficial to students. Results indicated some support for the benefits of co-enrollment. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Combining

Instructors of typical first-year college courses have become more concerned in recent years with how to boost their students' capacity to learn more effectively. Because students often perceive college as both quantitatively and qualitatively different from high school, they may also perceive their previous study strategies as being ineffective in this new setting. The result can be a paralyzing fear and an inability to imagine success in their coursework. Without the means to overcome this fear, learn new strategies, and imagine success, they will not make it beyond these first-year courses.

At Kent State—Stark, the first line of defense designed to help students who may be academically underprepared to meet the rigors of

college has been a study strategies course. This 3-credit hour course provides students with a) information regarding their individual learning styles, b) effective learning strategies to use in the classroom, and c) proven techniques to enhance individual and group study time outside of the classroom. While these concepts have been useful to students in the past, instructors of study strategies courses began to wonder if providing information about effective learning in a vacuum might not be as helpful as providing that information in a format tied to a particular course. Students co-enrolled in study strategies and a content course could then practice their newly learned skills in a college-level context. Ultimately, if this practice did pay off in the form of more efficient learning, higher grades, better understanding of content material and greater retention, it was believed that students could then generalize the learning and study skills to other classes.

In the past year, all the students enrolled in specific study strategies sections also took a general psychology course. The question was whether applying the study strategies immediately to a content course would prove more helpful to the students than taking the study strategies class when the strategies learned might not be applicable until a later semester. From Spring of 1999 through the present semester, we have been collecting data to see whether co-enrolling students in this way would offer any discernible benefits to our students. While the data set is somewhat limited, we have been able to conduct some preliminary analyses.

Method

At the Stark Campus, all entering students are given the COMPASS, a self-paced, computer-based assessment of basic skills. COMPASS measures how well prospective students understand what they read, how well they use the English language, and how well they use mathematics. The students' scores determine their placement in English and mathematics and may show a need for reading or study strategies. Students are not required to take the reading or study strategies classes and may, in fact, disregard their math and English placements and begin at the typical first-year level.

General psychology was chosen as the content course with which

the study strategies course would be paired. This choice was made for a number of reasons. Many first-year students are enrolled in general psychology because it is a Liberal Education Requirement and is also required for many majors. Psychology was also chosen because it is a heavy content course that, unlike other content courses such as history or chemistry, is generally unfamiliar to students. The willingness of the psychology instructor to participate in this study was also a factor.

In order to control for possible confounds in this study, one instructor who taught two sections of study strategies in each semester and one instructor who taught two sections of general psychology in each semester participated in this study. Students enrolled in study strategies sections taught by Jackie Rose and general psychology sections taught by Lee Fox-Cardamone were participants in this study. In addition, the general psychology sections taught by Fox-Cardamone included a majority of students who were not co-enrolled in any study strategies course. Of those enrolled, 232 students were in the relevant sections of general psychology for the two semesters covered, and 41 of those students were co-enrolled in the study strategies course. With few exceptions, the students enrolled in these classes were between the ages of 18 and 21.

Procedure

The general psychology course was taught no differently than in previous semesters. The syllabus included topics typical to such a course: research methods, biopsychology, altered states of consciousness, stress, learning, memory, intelligence, personality, abnormal behavior, therapy, cognition, development psychology, and social psychology. The structure of the course was lecture-driven; however, considerable time was spent eliciting student questions and comments about the material. Exams were multiple-choice, but the emphasis was on questions requiring students to analyze a vignette using psychological concepts. Similarly, required writing assignments for the semesters involved students taking a real-life incident that could be from their own experience or some other source and discussing how the incident related to some psychological principle or research discussed in class.

From previous semesters, it had been clear that students struggled with the types of exams used in the general psychology class. Students

were not accustomed to having to learn material and be able to apply it to answer questions. In addition, the writing assignments produced were often good, but it took many weeks of talking about topics and approaches in class, and often individual attention, for students to feel comfortable with this assignment.

The study strategies course utilized the same textbook that all other study strategies classes on campus used, *Orientation to College Learning*, by Dianna L. Van Blerkom. In addition, the textbook of the general psychology class, *Pathways to Psychology*, 2nd ed., by Robert J. Sternberg, was used so that assignments could draw on the same material for all students. While the study strategies instructor did not attend general psychology classes, she regularly drew on the psychology syllabus, conversations with the instructor, and students' notes to help target the learning exercises toward psychology course content. Both the rationale encouraging students to co-enroll as well as some of the learning strategies introduced in study strategies can be found in Appendix A.

The point of co-enrolling the students in both classes was to demonstrate to them in a hands-on way that the learning strategies being introduced were immediately useful to them. Further, it was thought that by encouraging immediate practice with these strategies in relation to a content course, students would make use of the learning literature which suggests that becoming actively engaged in learning leads to better retention of that learning (Jackson and Prosser, 1989).

Our hypotheses were: 1) the mean general psychology grades of students co-enrolled and those who were not would not be significantly different, and 2) students would perceive the study strategies course to be helpful in achieving their academic goals.

Results

At this point, the results of this study are preliminary. The mean grade for study strategies was a C+ ($M = 2.90$ on a 4-point scale). The mean grade for general psychology for those co-enrolled in study strategies was a C- ($M = 1.95$ on a 4-point scale). The mean score of those enrolled only in general psychology was a C ($M = 2.21$ on a 4-point scale). T-test findings conducted on the mean general psychology scores of students enrolled only in general psychology versus those who were co-

enrolled demonstrated no significant differences between the two groups, $t(230) = 1.26, p > .05$.

Anecdotal comments collected from students during course evaluations of study strategies indicate a strong satisfaction with the course:

1. "Because we interact so much in study strategies class, I found myself asking more questions in psychology class. I used to be afraid and now I have no trouble going to my psych. professor if I need help."
2. "I've gotten real good at predicting what the professor will ask on the test. It's almost like I've taken the test before because what I studied shows up as the test questions."
3. "When I got my first test grade in psych. class, I knew what I needed to do to get an even better grade on the next test. Without the study strategies class I would have been lost."
4. "I did OK in high school (without much studying), but that doesn't work in college. I'm glad I took advantage of this course because it's great starting out with a good GPA."
5. "College is hard work, but these courses have made it fun."
6. "When I talk through ideas with other students, I realize how much I know."

Conclusions

An increasing number of academically underprepared students are attending college. This is a trend that is unlikely to change in the near future, especially with financial incentives such as the Hope Scholarship. In addition, the zeitgeist in this country currently is one that encourages students to attend college to prepare for the technological rigors of the global workforce. With these forces at work, some colleges are going to be under increasing pressure to find ways to help academically immature students become students who are equipped to successfully navigate the college curriculum. Two-year regional campuses are among those on the frontline of this challenge.

Our results suggest that it may be possible to take students who are not yet ready for college classrooms and transition them by using courses

such as the study strategies course described here. There were no significant differences identified in the mean general psychology grades achieved by those students co-enrolled versus those who were not. While that may not sound like a major accomplishment, it is an accomplishment for the co-enrolled students who were identified by the COMPASS placement test as being significantly at-risk for doing poorly in college-level content courses. In addition, anecdotal comments regarding the study strategies course did support the hypothesis that students would perceive this course as helpful to them in achieving their academic goals.

A limitation of this study is that it remains unclear whether or not the study strategies course caused the level of performance found in general psychology. While we would like to argue that the content of the study strategies course, which attempted to mirror the content of the general psychology course, caused students to exceed initial expectations regarding their performance in general psychology, other possibilities exist. For example, the anecdotal comments suggest that the study strategies course boosted students' sense of confidence and competency. An increase in confidence and perceived competence could have resulted in better-than-expected performance in general psychology, regardless of the content of the study strategies courses.

In the future, we are planning on furthering our understanding of the issues of academic underpreparedness by collecting data on course grades earned by those students who were advised to take study strategies, refused to do so, and completed general psychology. A comparison between those students' grades in general psychology and the grades of students co-enrolling would provide a better test of our belief that study strategies is the kind of course that can really make a difference in a student's academic career. In addition, we are interested in examining how grades in study strategies and general psychology relate to grades obtained in other classes during the same semester in order to see whether study strategies has any additional spillover effect.

References

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- Sternberg, R.J. (2000). *Pathways To Psychology* (2nd ed.). Harcourt College

Publishers: New York.

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Appendix A: Rationale For Co-Enrolling

1) Why? When you learn a study strategy or technique in Study Strategies, you will practice it using lecture and reading material from General Psychology. The result is that you will be better prepared for your psychology test because you will be using effective study techniques.

2) What type of study strategies will I learn? You will learn to be an *active* learner. Some examples are: working in pairs or groups to review or edit class notes and predicting and writing practice test questions. Most importantly, active learning helps students to understand and remember information better.

You will learn how to be an *independent* learner. Only 1/3 of the information in college courses comes from the professor; 2/3 comes from you yourself and what you do outside of class. For those who take study strategies co-enrolled with general psychology, much of your outside-of-class study time for psychology takes place during class time in study strategies.

You will learn how to develop a *study plan* and generate *interest in textbook reading* so that you get the job done. The average number of textbook pages that students are assigned to read for a 3-hour course such as general psychology is 80 pages per week!

You and the other students in study strategies will become a *community of learners* who will support each other. When you feel more connected to a class and instructor, you feel less alone, especially when faced with the hard work of being a student.

3) Coordinating the psychology class with the study strategies class: students are required to bring their psychology books and notes to class as well as the textbook and notes for the study strategies class.

Time management—All students are required to establish a calendar for the entire semester. Using all the syllabi for each of their classes, they write all reading, homework, project, and research paper assignments on their calendars which are a continuous long strip. Fixed-commitment calendars,

identifying class, work, leisure, and study hours are reviewed weekly.

Lecture notes—Many students have never experienced a lecture class and do not know which information presented needs to be written as notes. General formatting tips as well as systems of note taking are taught. Students compare their notes to those of other students in class and determine if they are writing enough, too much, or too little.

Reading and Marking Textbooks—Students are required to choose two reading systems from the text book (S–Run, SQ3R, and P2R are presented) and read a chapter in the psychology book in each. In groups, the students discuss the chapters' contents and their understanding of them based on the reading systems they used. They determine if they need to adapt the reading system to their particular learning style and read a third chapter using their adapted system.

Preparing for Exams—Students learn the 5–Day Study Plan which they begin at least five days before each exam so they have time for review and practice of the material for the exam. They practice the use of word cards, question cards, study sheets, and creative memory tools. They practice, recite, rehearse, and quiz each other in groups during class. Specific memory strategies are discussed and psychology material is drilled. While the psychology class in which they are co–enrolled has only multiple–choice exams, the preparation for and execution of essay exams is studied for use in future classes. By executing essay exams over the psychology material, the students gain a better overall understanding of the concepts and how they are applied, which is the substance of the questions on their psychology exams in a different format.

Biographies

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